

INTRODUCING CAPTAIN AMERICA AND HIS FABULOUS
BAND — GUARDIANS OF THE SAFETY OF THE WORLD.
BY OTTO BINDER WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY STAN LEE

THE AVENGERS THE BATTLE OF THE EARTH-WRECKER



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Meet

The Avengers

CAPTAIN AMERICA-Transformed by science from an ordinary mortal into a man of matchless strength and intellect, he is their chosen leader.

THE WASP—In ordinary life, she is a superbly beautiful woman. When danger threatens, she becomes a startling agent of destruction.

GOLIATH-Ten feet tall, with the muscle power of a hundred strong men, he has pledged his total might to battle evil.

HAWKEYE-Wisecracking, seemingly irreverent, yet as fiercely courageous as the others, he possesses a long-bow whose strange and deadly arrows few can withstand.

IRON MAN-A famous scientist, he must live in metal sheathing of his own brilliant design, for if he ever leaves it, he knows he will instantly die.

This daring band ranges over the earth and over the universe in search of those who would endanger their planet and their fellow man.

The
Avengers

Battle The

Earth Wrecker

By
Otto Binder



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INTRODUCTION

Since the dawn of time man. has ever striven for the impossible—sought the unreachable—pursued the unattainable. Spearheading the endless struggle for survival, the ceaseless quest for glory, have been the heroes among us.

Each age has had its crusaders...its Robin Hood and his Merry Men...its Knights of the Round Table—heroes all, and more than heroes—superheroes all!

Who among us can say which were fact and which were fancy? Who can say where legend ends and history begins? Who can deny that the myth often out-lives the moment?

Today, a new group of superheroes has risen among us. As proud as the past—as courageous as the present—was unpredictable as the future. From the colorful pages of bestselling Marvel Comics to this great, block-busting Bantam Books edition, a new age of myths is born as We enter the glory-studded era of...the mighty ***Avengers!***

STAN LEE

Chapter 1

the *Avengers* meet

“Avengers, assemble!” rang out the cry from Captain America.

On their TV screens over a national network, millions of viewers saw that the leader of this famed group of costumed vigilantes was dressed most colorfully of them all. A blue form-fitting suit, huge white stars on chest and back, and a pair of red boots symbolized the meaning of his name by bearing the colors of the American flag.

Around his midriff above the belt were thirteen red and white stripes, carrying the patriotic theme further. Decorative white sleeves and red gloves completed the uniform, except for the hooded cap with an identifying **A**. Two small silvery wings at each side of the hood represented the American eagle emblem. Eye-slots cut in the lower front part of his hood allowed him to peer out. And his eyes were, though hardly by design, a patriotic blue.

This “burglar mask” effect was necessary for a good reason. None of the multitude watching over TV suspected that in his everyday identity Captain America was Steve Rogers, ordinary citizen. The secret was jealously guarded from the world at large. As an Avenger, he had many enemies who might take him by surprise if his private identity were known to them.

Beside Captain America on the podium lay his ever-present round shield, more important to him than his right arm. Striped like a target in red, white, and blue circles with a central white star, the mighty shield was his chief defense. And chief weapon---as many a rueful opponent had found out in Captain America's innumerable adventures against villainy.

First to make an entrance, in answer to the call, was Hawkeye. His uniform of blue leggings and black tunic, along with purple boots, shoulder pads, and hood, was of a swashbuckling style reminiscent of Robin Hood—purposely. Hawkeye was an archer supreme, his powerful longbow and quiver of unique arrows always across his back.

Hawkeye's incredible skill with arrows had already eased in the shade all the great legendary feats of Robin Hood, William Tell, or any other master Bowman of history.

Tall and lithe, his muscles rippling like steel springs, Hawkeye wore an impish grin on his face as he waved and spoke in a low bantering tone that the TV audience could not hear: "Hi, Winghead! Oh, sorry, Captain. America. I should show more respect to my *elders*."

"I won't insist on it," retorted Captain America evenly, "until you start -shaving."

"Ouch!" Hawkeye sat down, thinking over what quips he could next devise to sting his spangled companion, who had begun his fighting career way back in World War II.

TV cameras swung as two more costumed figures entered, Avengers known as Goliath and the Wasp. In private life they were Henry Pym and Janet Van Dyne.

Goliath's form-fitting garment of bright blue was adorned with gaudy yellow stripes running in a Y shape across his chest, shoulders, and back, then down the sides of the legs, terminating in yellow sox-boots.

The Wasp — to the surprise of some uninitiated TV viewers — was a girl. But the Avengers had never been an all-male organization.

Often called the “Wonderful Wasp,” her shapeliness was hardly obscured by her skin-tight costume. A red tunic and shoes, blue leotards, and black-sleeved blouse were blended in a tasteful design to emphasize her lissome strength, yet without detracting from her femininity. Sparkling brown eyes, a pert nose, and a saucy curve of the lips hinted at the warmth of her friendly personality.

Oddly, neither Goliath — who was 5 feet 10 — nor the Wasp looked “heroic,” as Captain America and Hawkeye did at the first glance. They simply looked like two ordinary people dressed up in masquerade costumes, who had wandered in by mistake. What would they be doing with the famed fighting team known as the Avengers, who had special abilities?

The answer to this paradox came when Captain America greeted them and added, “Please assume your Avenger forms before we officially open this meeting.”

“Yes, Cap,” nodded Henry Pym, stiffening with a concentrated look on his face, as if willing himself to do something. Suddenly and startlingly, before a million eyes on TV, he began to grow. Taller and taller he shot up, his shoulders broadening in proportion and his body expanding in unison. His suit of specially elastic materials stretched

along with him. Seven feet...eight...nine feet he towered, and still kept growing, until....

Bonk!

“Ow! My head!” he growled. “Can’t they make ceilings high enough for a “ten-foot man?”

Out over the land, there was a ripple of laughter. But it died swiftly as people stared in awe at the TV image of a ten-afoot giant, and it was plain to see why he was an Avenger. Massive muscles over his mighty form spoke of the enormous power he now possessed, like an oversized Samson and Hercules rolled into one.

And now his voice had gone down several tones to a deep rumble as he boomed: “Goliath the Avenger, present!”

Meanwhile, the Wasp was also changing size, but the opposite way. She began shrinking steadily, becoming smaller and smaller, to the size of a dog...a cat...a mouse....and still tinier. Finally—as the TV audience could anticipate from her name—she was -only the size of an insect, and the cameramen panned in close. Also, two gauzy wings had sprouted from her shoulders, so that she was as nearly like a “wasp” as a human being could be.

It was not black magic. It was the biological “magic” of scientist Henry Pym, who had originally devised the amazing bio-serums that could swiftly change himself and the girl to a giant and a midge, at will.

The wonderful Wasp’s forte lay not in deeds of valor and strength, as in the case -of the men, but in feats of tiny cleverness that often -turned the tables against their powerful adversaries when all seemed. lost. Far from looking

down at her as a “Weak female,” the male Avengers respected the Wasp for her performance of miniature miracles when sorely needed, particularly to evade dangerous traps. She had as rightful a place in the roster of Avengers as the men did.

Attaining her final wasp-sized tininess, she flitted gracefully through the air to land -on Goliath’s shoulder, sitting there pertly.

“Mind if I park here, High Pockets?” she piped in a thin buzzing voice.

“No parking charge,” rurrhled Goliath with a straight face. “Anyway, not for a cute cricket like you.”

It took no Sherlock Holmes among the TV viewers to see that the glance between the two pairs of eyes, gigantic and miniscule, was the look lovers give each other. As their appointed leader, Captain America rapped a gavel and spoke in authoritative tones. “Avengers, we are assembled not for-an emergency, but to...”

“Hey, Wait,” interrupted Hawkeye irreverently, glancing around. “One member is missing, Cap—Where’s old Rust Pot? Pardon me Iron Man?”

“Don’t shoot your arrows before you draw your bow,” said Captain America dryly to Hawkeye. “I was coming to that.”

Into the hanging mike he "said, “As many of you know, one member of our group is not here yet—Iron Man, or the Golden Avenger. However, he might be called a part-time Avenger in that he is closely associated with Anthony

Stark's scientific work. He joins us only on special missions, but-he was invited here and has not arrived yet."

Cap held up a telegram. "The reason is stated here: TESTING NEW TRANSISTORIZED JET-PROPULSION FOR MY IRON SUIT. WILL BE DELAYED ATTENDING THE AVENGERS' MEMORIAL MEET."

Glancing at the TV director -nearby, Cap added, "But since we can't hold up the televised schedule, We'll start the proceedings anyway. Iron Man should show up any moment."

Chapter 2

mount everest mystery

But Captain America was wrong.

Far across the World in the Himalayas, a golden-armored figure glinting in the sun was soaring through the azure sky, circling, darting, swooping among the -tallest mountain peaks on earth.

“Treacherous downdrafts and updrafts here are the best test for the new transistorized jet-propulsors in my boot-heels,” he thought, zooming at 500 miles per hour toward a mountain cliff, then veering sharply upward to sail safely over its jagged edge. “It’s all working fine.”

To any watcher, it would have been an unbelievable sight—a heavy metallic form gliding through the air with buoyant ease. The steel suit was gilded over the arms, legs, and face-plate, While the torso, gloves, and boots were tinted crimson. In general appearance, it was nothing like a knight of old, but more like a modern manlike robot.

Yet this was no mechanical being. Within the iron “uniform”—unknown to the world at large, and even to his fellow Avengers—was Anthony Stark, millionaire

playboy and Weapons inventor. His armored costume was not only an outer protection against harm, but an inner

protection against death. Without his steel suit, except for brief periods of time, Anthony Stark would die...of heart failure!

It was a strange story....

During a visit to the Vietnam war theater, to demonstrate a transistorized super-weapon, Stark had fallen prey to a Vietcong booby trap—a buried land mine. The blast mangled his body, but skilled surgery by the enemy saved his life and restored him to normal activity—except for his heart. Pieces of shrapnel had lodged so close to his heart that the surgeons could not remove them. And they had warned that any strenuous move on Stark's part might dislodge the bits of metal to pierce his heart and bring death.

Bitterly, Anthony Stark had resigned himself to face a lifetime as a near-invalid...if he lived any kind of lifetime. .

All this while Stark was an enemy prisoner. They had saved his life in order to wrest from him his scientific secrets and gain newly invented weapons. By a stroke of fate, a famous oriental biologist was also a prisoner at that time, in the same stockade. In secret collusion with him, Stark devised a daring plan—to build a magnetized iron suit that would continually pull outward at the pieces of shrapnel within his body and keep them from working inward toward his heart. Also, the knight-like armor was planned as an aid toward their escape from imprisonment.

Pretending that they were collaborating and building a fantastic new weapon for the Vietcong to use, the two prisoners were given free rein in a laboratory to carry out their ruse. Finally, one day, Stark had stepped forth in an

iron suit, suitably magnetized to save his heart from puncture, and ingeniously powered by transistorized technology to allow Stark to walk, manipulate his arms and carry on all other normal human activities—plus one other that was unique. By means of miniaturized power-packs in his boots, he could jet-propel himself into the air and fly at supersonic speeds, faster in fact than any jetcraft known. Through this, he had escaped from imprisonment and returned to America.

In order to join the Avengers and battle science renegades and their insidious weapons, Iron Man had later incorporated a wide variety of rays, forces, and devices as his own built-in weaponry.

Now he was proving out the latest advanced design in his flying system. “Mount Everest is the final test,” he thought to himself. “Braving the chilly blasts and roaring winds around its peak, piercing six miles high into the air, Will prove whether I really have -the all-weather flying ability I want. So, here goes. . . .”

Iron Man jetted upward as the majestic peak reared before him . . . higher . . . higher...higher. A fierce early-on gale knocked him. 500 feet sideways, but he recovered. A sudden downdraft, like a smashing blow, made gasp as he plummeted. a thousand feet down toward jagged ice blocks. But with a surge of his drumming boot-blasts he jetted back upward into the teeth of the howling downwind.

Next an updraft flung him like a cork, straight up for a mile, way beyond the tip of Everest. He fought his way down from the numbingly cold heights, agilely aiming for the summit. When a vicious whirlwind of air mixed with snow

spun him around in a relentless grip, Iron Man turned himself broadside and maneuvered into The quiet “eye,” then safely sped out of one side of the whirlpool.

The next instant, something yanked him downward again, with staggering force. How many tricks did the mighty mountain have to try against puny man?

“Wait, there’s something *different* about this,” he said to himself. “It’s not a downdraft at all. It feels more like... *Magnetism?*” The last questioning thought brought a gasp of startled surprise from his lips.

Since when did Everest display magnetic force? It had never been reported by the various expeditions who had reached the top and conducted scientific experiments there. Iron Man poured more jet power into his boot propulsors, but the powerful force kept pulling him downward.

“I can’t break out of it,” he thought, and panic crept into his mind. “If my downward speed keeps increasing at this rate, I’ll smash into the peak at a thousand miles an hour!” He didn’t dare finish the thought that even his intricate, superreinforced steel suit could never survive that frightful impact.

As his golden form hurtled downward, in the grip of an incredible magnetic force, he suddenly spied something at the tip of Mount Everest. There, in a fiat stretch of bare wind-swept rock, was something unbelievable.

“Am I having hallucinations from oxygen starvation?” he thought wildly. “I see a gigantic machine! It must be a powerful *electromagnet!*”

More details came out as he spun lower and closer. Banks of huge horseshoe magnets ran side by side, on top

of a framework support, below which lay a bulging sphere of riveted steel, obviously the power plant. A violet purling glow surrounded the sphere, the telltale sign of a nuclear dynamo. But it must be of enormous power to feed the electromagnets and create enough magnetism to pull Iron Man down from a mile high.

Iron Man read his multiple-data Wrist gauge and his eyes grew wide.

“One billion gauss?” Even his thoughts babbled now. “Why, that’s thousands of times stronger than any magnet ever produced in a research lab! That’s enough magnetic pull to tow all the cars on earth after it, or to pull apart a skyscraper beam by beam. It could lift twenty-five ocean liners like the *Queen Mary* a hundred miles high into orbit. It could, if aimed at the moon, even begin to pull it steadily out of orbit.”

Anthony Stark was not imagining wild things. He was a scientist. He knew exactly what this unprecedented magnetic force could do—the unthinkable.

Now Iron Man’s amazed thoughts turned to other burning questions. How had this supermagnet come here? Who was behind it? What was its purpose?

All this lanced through his mind in lightning rapidity as he fell like a stone, straight down toward that inescapable giant magnet. He noticed several meteorites whizzing past him, also attracted to the huge horseshoe device. They were meteors that had been sailing past earth and were simply yanked out of their age-old space trajectory!

Iron Man saw that arriving meteors did not wreck the supermagnet. Ten feet above the device, they met an

invisible cushion and bounced away harmlessly. What sort of superscientific “force field” protected the magnet?

Iron Man rolled up his eyes, breathing a last prayer, as he plummeted down the final hundred feet at meteoric velocity.

Across the world at Avenger headquarters, Captain America glanced at the clock with a slight frown. ““What’s with Iron Man?” he thought worriedly. “Why isn’t he here?”

He then turned to look into the TV camera, and spoke for the benefit of their vast unseen audience. “This is a special event in the Avengers’ annals. We decided to hold this Memorial Meet in honor of former members of the group in past years, those who are now engaged elsewhere in their own solo activities. But they will never be forgotten for the great services they performed as Avengers in past years.”

The star-spangled Avenger paused to stab his finger at a stud on the podium’s control hoard. The lights dimmed in the great hall. Then an automatic spotlight swung down to limelight a huge statue standing in an arched niche in the wall.

Neon letters blazed forth—THOR, GOD OF THUNDER! .

No doubt a vast cheer went up from millions of homes. But the Avengers sat silently, honoring a former Avenger with an unvoiced accolade. Captain America then spoke their official eulogistic tribute:

“Mighty Thor, the immortal god who journeyed from Valhalla to earth to join the Avengers when we needed him most. Who will forget his mighty hammer, with

which he could shatter steel or stone? Or the thunder-and-lightning storms he created to confound our enemies? Or his magnificent courage battling villainous foes who wielded awesome dark powers that even nullified Thor's magic? Or..."

"Or," muttered Hawkeye, fidgeting in his seat, "Thor's pompous attitude and the lingo he used, half flowery and all Square?"

"A philologist," observed the Wasp in defense of Thor, from Goliath's shoulder, "you are not, Archerman. Look it up in the dictionary..."

"I know," growled Hawkeye. "Under Ph, not F. You mean Thor has Word-skill, eh? That's funny—under F, not Ph."

"Does his ability make you Thor?" whispered the Wasp, "Under S, not Th."

Hawkeye silently threw up his hands in surrender.

Captain America was saying, "In. conclusion, we can all cry Well done, Thor! At present, he has returned to his abode in Valhalla."

Cap pressed another stud and the searchlight shifted to a statue titled QUICKSILVER, a man in a light green one-piece uniform. His silvery hair stuck out at the sides as winglike tufts.

"Like his name," said. Captain America, "Quicksilver moved with fantastic speed, which came from his being a mutant variety of human being. Back in his Balkan homeland, Quicksilver's everyday name was Pietro. He

guarded his secret abilities well, but often used them as an Avenger.”

Cap’s eyes misted. a bit as if looking into the past. “Quicksilver was a blur of motion, able to outspeed cars, trains, or planes as if they were stuck in mud. He could run circles around any Olympic track star. He won every grim race of life and death against Father Time himself.”

“Is Cap for real?” snorted Hawkeye in a low tone. “Methuselah there is giving us cornball jazz that went out with Ben Hur’s chariot. “When will he catch up with the jet age? Can’t he dig plain *English*?”

“Shush!” spat out the Wasp. “Cap came from an earlier generation than ours. You can’t blame him. if his speech is behind the times. But when it comes to a fight, he speaks “absolutely modern clobberese with his fists, right? So we can forgive him being a bit of a. square.”

“Square?” choked Hawk-eye. “He’s a cube...*cubed*. Why, I...*Ulk!*” -

Hawkeye’s whisper choked off, for the simple reason that Goliath’s huge fore-finger and thumb around his throat had given a tiny squeeze...enough to make Hawkeye turn purple, unable to catch his breath, let alone talk for the next few moments.

Cap swung the spotlight to a third statue. Another girl like the Wasp was portrayed, but in a witch-like scarlet costume as befitted her emblazoned name that lighted up—THE SCARLET WITCH.

“Pietro’s sister, Wanda,” explained Captain America for the benefit of the TV audience, “was also a- mutant, but her

special ability lay in witch-like supernatural powers. For a while, both Quicksilver and Scarlet Witch were pawns in the hands of Magneto, an unscrupulous mastermind. And originally, they were thus the enemies of the-law and fought against a famed band called the X-men, while carrying out Magneto's sinister schemes. They voluntarily joined the Avengers later, to make up for their former misdeeds under duress."

"So?" muttered Hawkeye. "I was also an anti-Avenger at one time, or at least I battled Iron Man time and again. Then, on my own, I reformed and became a good guy. So who pats me on the back? If you ask me,,,"

"We aren't asking you a thing, William Tell-it-all," came from the Wasp icily. "Besides, we current members of the Avengers all get a rundown later, addressed to the TV viewers. Wait your turn, Bow Twanger."

Hawkeye glared at the Wasp. Goliath glared at Hawkeye; Hawkeye decided to glare elsewhere.

The lights came on again and Captain America snapped erect. "In conclusion, let us salute the former Avengers for their deeds, always to be remembered as long as Avengers keep assembling."

As they started to rise to their feet, a tiny voice buzzed in Goliath's ear. "Careful, High Pockets . . . the ceiling, you know."

Barely in time, Goliath bent his neck and stood. half bowed as they all saluted the three statues and said in chorus, "Hail to Thor, Quicksilver, and the Scarlet Witch!"

Captain America now smiled for the cameras, relaxing. But inside he was wondering, “When is Iron Man going to show up? What's keeping him? Did he run into something unusual?”

Chapter 3

Karzz, the Conqueror

Captain America could hardly guess how unusual was the “something” that Iron Man had run into and how deadly. He was plummeting like a stone toward the mammoth electromagnet on the peak of Mount Everest, pulled downward. by superpowerful forces.

But he had not given up all hope. Through his swirling mind a desperate plan had formed. Rapidly, his gloved hand grasped a dial on his chest and rheostated the total power of his suit to its highest output. Ten megawatts of energy sizzled through his circuits and fed into his antimagnetic unit.

Clashing forces flung him back a hit, as his antimagnetic radiation fought the supermagnetic pull below. But inexorably, he was drawn down again, his antimagnetic unit whining uselessly. It was like trying to paddle a canoe up Niagara Falls.

Still, his antimagnetic “brake” had slowed his fall considerably. Was it enough to save his steel suit from cracking open like an eggshell against the force-field cushion?

Fifty feet...25...10...5...WHAM!

A shriek tore from Anthony Stark's lips, inside, as his outer iron hulk slammed into the force-field like a car smashing into a brick Wall at two hundred fifty miles an hour.

But his steel suit held up without cracking, and his built-in molecular-foam padding protected his fragile human body from absorbing too much of the bruising impact against the armored linings. With no more than his wind knocked out, Iron Man bounced a hundred feet high from the force-field barrier, then fell off to the side toward bare hard rock.

Shaking off reeling dizziness, Iron Man managed to Shoot out a retro-braking burst of jets in time, so that he landed on his feet with no more of a jar than that of a than jumping down ten feet.

He swayed on his feet a moment, almost collapsing, but then his spirit-level adjusters and gyros automatically straightened him up. His blurred eyes cleared up and focused—on a man in a strange costume.

iron Man stared in Wonder. The man was dressed in clothing -that resembled no style ever seen on earth before. His height and figure were average, but his face had a saturnine cast. Strangest of all was the malevolent expression in his frosty blue eyes, infinitely cold and hostile.

"An intruder," came his harsh voice, as if he owned Mount Everest. "But you are different from the other earth-people in my world monitor screen. You are encased in protective armor. Who are you?"

“My real. name is unimportant,” answered Stark. “They call me Iron Man, the Avenger.” He waved at the humming machine, still awed. “And just who are you? Did you build this supermagnet? And Why?”

The stranger drew himself up regally, and spoke in lofty tones. “I am Karzz, the Conqueror!”

“I imagine I’m supposed to tremble at the name,” said Iron Man sarcastically, “but you might as well have said Joe Smirch, for all the name means to me. Where do you do your so-called conquering?”

“All over the universe, my mocking friend. World after World among the stars has fallen before my invincible legion of space warcraft. I am not a native of earth. I am from a far-off World of superscience beyond your imagination.”

Iron Man would have put him down for a harmless crackpot, except for one thing—the supermagnet. You couldn't laugh *that* off. And after all, it was a well-accepted theory that the universe was full of other habitable worlds, many of which might be further advanced than earth, to the point; of having achieved interstellar spaceflight.

“All right, you’re a denizen of another distant solar system,” agreed Iron Man. “I see that evolution on your world produced the same human species as earth did.”

“You are mistaken,” denied Karzz. A “faint smile played about his lips. “Prepare for a shock, earthling. We control metabolic transformation of our body tissues at will. Watch...this is how I *really* look.”

Before Iron Man’s eyes, the human form began to subtly and steadily alter, like a man melting down and changing

into something else. The face and other human attributes faded into an amorphous mass, over which a new face and form began to superimpose themselves.

Iron Man's eyes kept widening at what he saw materializing, portion by portion, until there stood before him a shocking monstrosity. He was in general still semi-man-like, and not changed in general size. But all else was utter madness....

A face with blotched purple skin...ghastly green lips...hair of a poisonous blue...and eyes that were fiery red like hot coals. The arms had changed into boneless tentacles with ten slender "fingers" that writhed. The two gnarled legs ended in hooves instead of feet.

It was a surrealistic creature beyond the imagination of a Dali...a nightmare beyond the wildest phantasmagorias of the human mind. Iron Man recoiled as if from a loathsome monster—yet there was intelligence in the creature's face. Superintelligence, in fact; and clammy fear clutched at Stark's ailing heart. Earthmen could expect no mercy or pity from such coldly inhuman intellects.

"Appalled, earthling?" mocked the alien. "But let me hasten to inform you that nausea strikes me when I gaze upon your horridly repulsive human form." Letting that sink in," the alien began reversing the process, his monstrous form slowly metamorphosizing back to the human "disguise" he had worn before.

"It is not to spare your eyes that I adopt human form on earth," Karzz commented, "but because in my own form I am dangerously unadapted to the earthly environment. On our native planet, we breathe chlorine gas. And only in

human guise can I breathe this horrible oxygen in your atmosphere, poisonous to us.”

Karzz shrugged and went on.

“To satisfy your curiosity as to why I can speak your language fluently, I have been on your world a week now. During that time I tuned in radio broadcasts and learned all languages.”

“All of them on earth?” gasped Iron Man.

“Including all local idiom,” nodded Karzz. “In Americanese, for instance, I dig how the cats talk. Crazy, man.”

With a wry face, he turned haughty. “I know everything else about earth. from my long-range sensors, scanners and monitors—the continents and oceans, mountains, rivers; also cities, subways, cars, trains, planes. And people, pets, and politics.”

“You absorbed all this in one short week!” marveled Iron Man, aware of the superintelligence facing him.

Then, bracing himself, he asked the next logical. but rhetorical question:

“You have come, I suppose, to conquer earth now?”

“No, earthman.”

Prepared for the affirmative, Iron Man was staggered, his head whirling.

“But you boasted of how many other planets you had conquered. Then what else could you be here for?”

“To *destroy* earth!” hissed the alien, his eyes seething in ferocious hatred.

In America, the Avengers’ colorful Memorial Meet played on to a rapt TV audience.

“We have honored past members of the Avengers,” announced Captain America. “We will now review the current Avengers, giving a broad resume of their origin and special abilities. First, a man who sits nine feet tall in the saddle, and I’m not exaggerating. Here he is, the man mountain...the modern Gulliver...the walking skyscraper...*Goliath!*”

The spotlight limned the huge ten-foot form and a gasp sounded in every home in America that had television. The Wasp had flitted off his shoulder. “This is your show, Big Boy. I’ll go press the button for the elephant to come on stage.”

Flying to the podium, the Wasp darted down and jammed the button with her descending feet, just before Captain America’s finger got there. She, grinned impishly at him.

Out on the stage of the auditorium, a big door flew open and a moving platform came into view, on which stood a huge bull elephant with one end of a heavy rope wrapped in its trunk. Goliath picked up the other end. The rope tightened as he braced himself and the trained elephant began to pull.

“A tug of war between Goliath and a five-ton elephant,” sang out Captain America. “Don’t bet too soon on the wrong one!”

At first, the powerful beast began to back up, dragging Goliath forward. But then the towering Titan planted his feet, rippled his muscles, and began a slow, steady pull that first halted the elephant, then—incredibly—dragged him forward foot by foot, and finally brought him across the dividing line.

Panting, Goliath took a bow in the spotlight as the other Avengers’ applauded. “You know it’s not muscle but sheer weight that wins a tug of war,” said Hawkeye maliciously, eyeing the Wasp. “It’s a good thing that cloudscraper has plenty of fat—between his ears.”

“Fat or not,” said the Wasp sweetly, “it can outthink whatever stuffing they put in your skull...probably rocks ”

Captain America cleared his throat as Goliath sat down.

“Now listen to the strange story -of Goliath, alias Giant Man, alias Ant-Man. He is a famous biologist in private life and one day, some years ago, he devised an astounding bio-serum which could shrink the human body down to insect size. He then became the Ant-Man for a while, cleverly using his tininess to outwit certain evil-doers.”

The spotlight now swung to the Wasp, again perched on Goliath’s shoulder.

“Dr. Henry Pym,” said Captain America, giving Goliath’s real name, for his “secret” identity had been revealed to the

world at large, “eventually let his girl friend, share the bio-serum, a variation of which shrank her down to small size and gave her some of the characteristics that account for her name—the Wasp.”

The audience was listening raptly to Cap’s commentary as he continued. “The Wasp has shared in many Avenger adventures, doing her part in confounding our foes. Originally, like Ant-Man, she had to take the reducing serum each time, then an enlarging serum—a sort of antidote—to regain normal human size. But eventually with enough bio-serum in her body to last a long time, she developed a mental way to shoot down to small size, and back to human size. By will power alone.”

The spotlight under Cap’s control. swung back to Goliath.

“Let’s return to Ant—Man. Dr. Pym one day took an overdose of the enlarging serum, and instead of stopping at human size, he kept growing and growing to the tremendous height of twenty-five feet. He then joined the Avengers as Giant-Man. But in time, he found his Cyclopean stature too much of a handicap.”

“Probably,” Hawkeye murmured to the Wasp, “because too many people kept asking him, ‘Hey, how’s the weather up there?’”

The star-spangled MC went on before the cameras. “Dr. Pym finally revised his formula so the bio-serum kept him below fifteen-feet tall...for a while. Even this was an unwieldy bulk to maneuver—especially into buildings made for people not much over a third his size-so he settled on a more modest ten feet, as he is today. Having been on a leave of absence from the Avengers for these experiments,

he returned to us in a new uniform and with his new name of Goliath.”

Cap went on in a deadly serious tone. “Needless to say, this giant Avenger has helped us out of many a tight spot—tighter than if he himself tried to squeeze into a telephone booth.”

“He got himself into tight spots worse than that,” drawled Hawkeye for -the Wasp’s benefit, “like that time he got stuck in a narrow cave and the rest of us had to figure out some way of working him loose...before a load of nuclear bang-bang stuff went off and blew the place to bits. You weren’t there that time, Wasp.”

“Were you all blown to bits?” she asked innocently.

“Into a million bits,” growled Hawkeye. “But the same guy who put Humpty Dumpty together again came along and serviced us, see?”

“They never did put Mr. H. D. together again,” the Wasp reminded him. “So that explains why you’re scatter-brained at times.”

Hawkeye was about to make a sarcastic retort when the spotlight fell on him. He bounced to his feet and bowed in the grand manner, with the TV-camera lens aimed at him.

“Robin Hood, they say, could split arrows,” came Cap’s buildup. “But now you’re going to see a demonstration by Hawkeye, our third Avenger member, that would make envious Robin Hood put away his bow and retire.”

Hawkeye strode to the middle of the floor, where an attendant stood with a pistol, facing a target fifty feet away.

Hawkeye stood beside him, pulled an arrow from his quiver, and notched it to his bowstring.

Hawkeye pulled back the bowstring with deceptive ease; It would have taken two other strong men to do the same, one holding the bow, one pulling the string. His firing hand poised, Hawkeye snapped: "Fire!"

At the same instant that the attendant fired his pistol, Hawkeye's bowstring twanged. A bullet and a sleek light-weight Wooden. arrow sped to the target in motion too fast for the TV eye to follow. '

But the TV camera could record what happened in the next milli-second, as described by Captain America. "See, folks? The arrow arrived *first* and the bullet *split* it!"

The thunderous applause all over America could not be heard, as Hawkeye, acting nonchalant, returned to his seat.

Cap's voice resumed. "This superarcher's repertory of arrows includes unique kinds of his own devising to perform ingenious feats. To name but a few—the blast-arrow that can blow open a locked door, the stun arrow for putting enemies out of action, the rocket harpoon to spear flying criminal craft, the bolo arrow to twine around a running man's ankles before he can escape, and the sneeze smog arrow which both throws a smoke screen for an Avenger's escape and causes pursuers to sneeze violently and ruin their aim with weapons. There are many more."

"Especially the bombast arrow," whispered the Wasp, "which carries a recording of Hawkeye bragging about himself and bores the enemy to death."

Hawkeye had to keep smiling. He was on camera.

“Hawkeye’s history is somewhat like that of Quicksilver and the Scarlet Witch,” Cap informed the audience. “He had been a bitter and resourceful foe of Iron Man for a while. But not by his own choosing. In reality, he had been wrongly suspected of crime by the police, which led him to join forces with a notorious girl-spy, the Black Widow. This enmeshed him in intrigue that further got him in bad with the authorities. Hunted like a criminal, he was forced to battle for his own life and freedom.”

“A poor, misunderstood, downtrodden slob,” murmured the Wasp, wiping away a false tear. Then she brightened. “But there’s justice after all, and today you’re a heroic, honored, and respected . . . slob.”

Hawkeye kept smiling into the TV camera, but his hand, which was off-camera, moved around to where he could reach toward the tiny tormentor on Goliath’s shoulder.

But when Hawkeye flicked his finger to give her what would amount to a good slap, he met nothing. Then a larger form grew rapidly nearby until the Wasp was her normal girl size.

“Did you forget,” she smiled, walking away from the frustrated Hawkeye, “that I was to take over and tell about Captain America himself?”

On the podium, the Wasp whispered to Cap: “Actually, Iron Man was supposed to get the build-up bit before you, Cap. What do you suppose is holding him tip?”

“Oh, maybe he met the Man from Mars,” said Cap, trying to sound blithe, and not knowing how close his quip had come to the grim truth....

Chapter 4

Earth Doom

In the bleak iciness at Mount Everest's peak, Karzz: the alien, conqueror of a host of worlds, spoke again. "No, I came not to conquer earth but to *destroy* it. I will wreck your world and annihilate " all humans on earth, every last -one."

Iron Man was stunned by Karzz's threat and by the venom of his words. "But *why*? What has earth done to you or your faraway future world?"

"That is too long a tale to explain right now," responded Karzz abruptly. "I am Wasting time. I must set the co-ordinates of my ultramagnet and keep it centered on its target."

"Just what is your ultramagnet aimed at, out in space?"

"I have no time for frivolous explanations," Karzz answered sharply. "It is part of my plan to destroy earth, that's all you need to know before you...die!"

With that he pressed a stud on his belt. A livid ray sprang forth and a rock next to Iron Man turned to dust. The next ray struck Iron Man squarely in the chest.

“Good-bye, Iron Man,” said Karzz, starting to turn away. He swung his head back, in a perfect movie double-take. “You’re still standing there!” he gasped.

“Sure,” said Iron Man cheerfully. Whatever your gizmo was supposed to do it failed against my steel suit. Which, by the way, has withstood a dozen assorted types of rays, bullets, shells, rockets—you name it—hurled at me by my enemies.”

Respect shone in Karzz’s eyes for the first time. “I see you are a very special earthling, equipped to battle super-forces.”

“You’re right on the nose,” iron Man came back. “And it so happens that as an Avenger, I’m an unofficial guardian of all earth. Now I’m ordering you off our world...you and your contraption both.... Or else!”

“Or else you will drive me off?” Karzz said with a scornful laugh. “All right, do so.”

“You asked for it, Frankenstein.” iron Man was already rheostating up his suit’s power, getting ready for action. He charged forward suddenly. “I’m going to knock you halfway to Aldebaran,” he grated between clenched teeth.

Iron Man wondered why Karzz didn’t move, why he didn’t show the slightest fear. Except for his belt, he seemed unarmed helpless. iron Man touched a push button on his power-pack, sending a surge of more than human power into his mechanized right arm. Then he swung his fist, ready to knock all the fight out of the alien right from the start.

Klang!

Iron Man's balled fist struck some invisible barrier before it reached Karzz. Iron Man reeled back himself, seeing now the glowing indigo aura that surrounded Karzz protectively.

"I should have known," the Avenger chided himself, "that you would have the same force-field shield around you as around your ultramagnet. But don't worry, I'm not through. I've got a dozen other fighting tactics to try."

Tensing himself and clicking over transistor power relays, Iron Man prepared for all-out battle against a super-scientific foe.

On the podium at the Avengers' gathering, the Wasp pressed the stud that swung the spotlight on Captain America beside her.

"Last, but the furthest from least you can get," she said, "is the Avengers' leader, whom I hardly need name. He's known not only to the younger people of today, but to all of you of the previous generation some twenty years ago. Captain America is unique among us he's had *two* glorious careers as a fighting hero upholding American ideals!"

Cap's face was dreamy, as his own -thoughts flew back to those former days....

"It's a strange story," resumed the Wasp. "At the start of World War II, a young Mr. A—for anonymous—was rejected by the army as being too puny and in poor health. But it so happened. some scientists were looking for just such a 4-F specimen of manhood, to use the last term loosely. Mr. A was then given a special hormone injection, and before their

eyes he changed like a Jekyll-Hyde into a big, brawny, powerful man—the ideal soldier—and more.”

Cap glowed, reliving that grand and glorious moment of his transformation from the proverbial “90-pound weakling” of the ads into a 190-pound mass of fighting flesh.

“Mr. A now passed the army tests with flying colors; and soon after, Sergeant A ran into Nazi saboteurs and laid the whole gang low with his pile-driving fists. He then adopted his colorful uniform in order to work as a mysterious champion against democracy’s foes. The fame of Captain America became a byword to the world all during the War years, as he and his young pal, Bucky, smashed spy and saboteur rings right and left.”

At the name “Bucky,” Cap’s eyes had gone bleak with painful memories.

“Unfortunately,” added the Wasp, and her tone went down sympathetically, “Bucky one day gave his life to stop a Nazi plot involving high-flying planes. Cap seemingly fell to his death too, landing at sea and sinking never to come up again. They finally gave up the search and pronounced Captain America dead.”

The Wasp paused dramatically.

“They were dead wrong. By an amazing twist of fate, Cap sank and was frozen in suspended animation for twenty years. A block of ice holding his preserved body finally drifted ashore and was worshiped by Eskimos as some kind of ‘ice god.’ But one day the ice block was broken, probably during a violent storm. Later, as the ice melted, others found a figure in a spangled costume coming to life. Captain America lived again!”

Cap looked bewildered, in memory of that utterly unbelievable moment when he had opened his eyes to find out he had not met his end . . . but faced a whole new life ahead.

“Amazingly,” continued the Wasp, “a physical examination showed that despite his twenty-year frozen sleep, Captain America retained his full physical powers and his same youthful vigors. He had not aged a day in those twenty years. Time had stood still for him. So, although he was an ‘old-timer’ chronologically, he soon proved he was far from an ‘old man’ ready to be retired. He froze at sea at the peak of his lighting career—and he was revived at the peak of his powers to resume his fighting career. After a ‘rude interruption’ of twenty years, We might say.”

Everybody smiled, except Cap himself. The Wasp intuitively knew what he was thinking.

“But don’t think it was all glory for the two-time hero. Behind him, lost forever, lay the world and the times he knew . . . the people he loved...and Bucky. He was in a new and strange world, almost terrifyingly different at first. And though Captain America was invited into the Avengers and quickly gave ample proof that his fighting prowess was undiminished, there at times came nagging thoughts—would his age suddenly catch up with him? Would he slip sometime and endanger all the Avengers during a crucial moment? Could a man from the past really live up to his role as the world’s greatest fighting man...*twice in a row*? Yes, doubts gnawed at him constantly.

Cap tried to smile, or at least to look blank before the pitiless TV camera’s eye, but he knew that his eyes were haunted from those inner agonies he had gone through.

The Wasp drew herself up and her voice rang out once more.

“But all that is by the board now. If Captain America was a has-been who could never make the grade, why did we Avengers unanimously elect him our leader? Here’s why—for his great *experience*, double that of any of us, due to his two careers. For his unquenchable *courage*, undimmed by a twenty-year hibernation. For his *cool level head*, and his ability to weigh and judge matters of life and death in battling cunning enemies, and last.... But let us demonstrate this final quality. Cap, go to it.”

The spotlight broadened to take in a machine gun that came out of a recess in the Wall, with the dummy of an old-time Nazi behind it.

“That machine gun will be fired by automatic devices. The dummy is just window dressing, to bring back a scene of the past when Captain America faced such dangers and had to smash through. Watch!”

Crouching like a track star ready for the hundred yard dash, Captain America waited until the loud staccato of the gun crashed through the silence. At almost the "same second he leaped forward, his shield in front of him, as if deflecting a hail of death.

Like a tiger he sprang forward, leaping in great bounds, powered by the strongest leg muscles on earth." He had spent countless hours in the toughest training camp ever known—the rugged Commandos of World War II. And today he spent more endless hours between duties’ in the Avengers’ superb gym, practicing the gymnastics that made his body a smooth human machine with speed, power, and

quickness of reflexes never achieved before by any human being on earth.

Where Goliath could rely on his giant form, Hawkeye on his amazing arrows, and Iron Man on his steel suit, Captain America had nothing to depend on except his own original self—plus his shield.

Running straight into the barrage of hot lead, warding it off with his shield, the spangled fighter then made an incredible flying leap the rest of the way—a leap that would have broken the world’s Olympic record. While landing head foremost, his mighty rock-hard fist swung against the dummy’s chin, knocking his enemy twenty feet away. The machine gun was stilled and Captain America stood up, a momentary triumph lighting his face as if he were reliving an actual episode in the long-gone past.

“Great, Winghead!” yelled Hawkeye, leaping to his feet, as all the TV audience must be doing. “Anybody says we ought to send you to the old man’s home will get my arrows zinging at his heels, the whole quiver full!”

“Why, Hawkeye!” rumbled Goliath, half accusingly. “You said something *good* about Cap for once.”

Hawkeye flushed guiltily.

“Amazing!” muttered Goliath, shaking his head as if to clear it. “Don’t let it happen again, Hawkeye, or we’ll begin to think that down underneath it all you’re a right guy.”

The Wasp had a shock—two shocks—for the audience.

“That dummy wasn’t stuffed with light straw. It weighed two hundred and fifty pounds. And those bullets he waded

into—they were *real*. Captain America insisted on it—he doesn't believe in fakery.

All over America this brought down the house, figuratively speaking. They hardly had to be told the conclusion spoken by the Wasp: "And so, the primary quality that won this peerless battler our Avenger leadership is his *one-man-army fighting ability*."

The red-white-and-blue champion was flattered...but also worried. It would have been the turn next of Iron Man, the missing member. His absence was now definitely alarming.

*

Across the world on Mount Everest, Iron Man tried a new tactic against Karzz the Conqueror. From the index finger of his right glove, fed by transistorized power, shot a laser-beam, a thin ray of intense light that ate down into rock as if it were cheese. A tunnel swiftly formed into which Iron Man plunged, disintegrating rock ahead of him a-t the rate. of twenty feet a second.

In essence, he was "diving" through the solid stone. Hidden from his enemy's eyes, Iron Man tunneled down, then arched upward, finally popping up right behind Karzz, who was taken by surprise.

An iron fist lashed out and caught the alien in the small of the back, sending him sprawling ignominiously.

"I thought so," grated Iron Man. "Your force-shield only protects you from the front, not from the back. It's not a curving shield all around you but a fiat barrier that can protect you -only on one side."

“Clever deduction, earthling,” snarled Karzz, leaping to his feet. “But it will gain you nothing. And now let us see if you can withstand the lightning-blast ray.”

He touched another stud. on his belt and a lightning flash sprang forth to strike Iron Man. It had such staggering power that it hurled him back a dozen feet as dazzling sparks flew off his armor. But Stark had’ felt none of the unbelievable voltage inside his metallic shell, and quickly recovered his balance.

“No good playing Zeus,” mocked Iron Man. “I’m fully insulated against all electrical forces. And now...”

Iron Man’s jets propelled him into the air in a blur-swift arch, to come down directly behind Karzz. An iron leg swung before the alien could turn.

“Owww!” It was a very human-sounding yelp from Karzz as an iron boot connected with the proper part of his anatomy in back.

“A kick in the pants is only -the first of the punishment you’re going to take,” Iron Man vowed grimly darting away as the infuriated alien whirled and shot forth another ray, which missed.

A strange duel began then. Again and again, Iron Man twisted through the air in swift flight, circling to come up behind Karzz and deliver blows at his unprotected back. Angrily, Karzz shot forth a variety of rays, all of which spanged off Iron Man’s armor without doing any harm.

“You’ll be a mass of bruises from the back of your head down to your heels,” promised iron Man relentlessly, delivering another blow from the rear.

“Donnerrvetter!” cursed Karzz. Iron Man was startled at the German word, until he realized the space master-mind was a world linguist knowing all tongues. “It is not you,” said the alien, “but your iron suit that I am fighting.”

He suddenly touched another stud on his belt. The ray that struck Iron Man seemed to do nothing at all. He felt no blow, no force... But with a gasp he noticed the trail of red dust left in the air as he jetted in a loop.

“Yes, iron oxide,” gloated Karzz. “That was the Rust-ray, with the ability to oxidize iron instantly. Keep coming until I can turn your whole suit into crumbling dust.”

Iron Man tried to twist and loop in the air, but Karzz made an adjustment on his belt and the rust-ray expanded into a wide cone constantly bathing its target. Stark could sense his iron suit crumbling away, layer by layer.

It was a losing game. If all his protective armor turned into rust, he would not be Iron Man any more. Then only frail Anthony Stark -would face Karzz and his frightful superscience weaponry.

Rheostating full power into his jets, Iron Man spun away from the peak of Mount Everest as fast as he could.

“Round one goes to you, Karzz,” he called back. “But I’ll return...with the other Avengers.”

“You will be doing me a favor,” came back the challenge. “I want to prove how futile it is for any earthlings to match wits and weapons with me. Nothing can stop me from fulfilling my mission—earth’s destruction. *N’est ce pas?*”

That incongruous French phrase, coming from the lips of the non-earthly being, made his threat all the more horrifying. It was a sign of the multiple-IQ mind they were pitted against.

Chapter 5

a Job for the *Avengers*

Another “iron man” charged his opponent, back in America at Avenger headquarters, Captain America, head lowered and shield up, was charging Hawkeye, who was pulling his great bow to its utmost.

The Avenger “Gladiator Games” were on, a planned aftermath of the Memorial Meet. Millions of TV viewers thrilled to see these modern gladiators battling one another to sharpen their fighting skills.

It was not, of course, a battle to the death. The rules were that the male Avengers would pair off, round robin, and each try to gain a point over his adversary, while the Wasp kept score.

It would be a point for Hawkeye if one of his arrows could send Cap’s shield spinning out of his hands involuntarily. A point would be made for the star-spangled stalwart if he got close enough to Hawkeye to wrest away his bow.

Hawkeye’s bowstring twanged, releasing his invisible plastic arrow. If Cap didn’t see it in time, the arrow’s deflecting blow would knock his shield away by sheer force.

But Cap's keen ears caught the whistle of the shaft through the air and in a split second he used trigger-trained muscles to dodge and let the unseen arrow whine over his head.

Hawkeye's right arm became a blur of motion as he reached back into his quiver for arrow after arrow, releasing them with the rapidity of a machine gun.

A smoke arrow made Cap cough, but a whirling sweep of his shield quickly cleared the air.

An electric arrow touched the shield and sent a 500-volt jolt through it—only Cap wasn't holding it. He had quickly dropped it to the floor, letting it bounce up neatly back into his hand, receiving none of the shock meanwhile.

The bolo arrow with its weighted cords swung through the air and caught Cap around the ankles, pitching him forward for a tumble, during which he might—Hawkeye hoped—lose the grip on his shield. But Cap rolled with his fall, turned a complete somersault while kicking off the entwining cords, and came back on his feet still charging forward.

But the outcome of this contest was never to be known.

"Hold it, you two!" rang out a voice, as a golden form smashed its way in through a window. "Save your fighting for Karzz the Conqueror."

Landing neatly on his feet near the TV cameraman, Iron Man waved. "The show's over. Sign off and clear out, all of you. The Avengers have a job to do."

“But listen,” protested the TV producer, running forward angrily. “We were promised a full hour’s show. Think of our disappointed audience—”

“I’m thinking of them, all right,” retorted Iron Man, “and of everyone else on earth. There won’t be any TV shows again...ever...unless the Avengers handle a certain emergency without delay. Now, don’t ask for details. We don’t want to alarm the public. Just clear out...pronto.”

Cap placated the producer by promising to resume the show some other time; then he told the viewers that the “Second half” of their program would be shown at a later date.

‘When outsiders were gone, Cap faced Iron Man. “Out with it, Avenger. This must be a top priority emergency.”

Iron Man extended an arm and brushed some red dust off. “It’s top priority, double in spades,” he said, then explained the situation. The other Avengers listened with widening eyes.

“And so,” finished Iron Man, “we’ve got to defeat Karzz the Conqueror and—well, corny or not—save the world.”

“Hmm,” said Cap. “You told us he refused to tell *why* he wanted to destroy earth. But just *how* is he going to do it? Any idea?”

“That superelectromagnet of his must have something to do with it,” Iron Man answered. “But just how it could wreck the world is anybody’s guess.”

“Baloneyville!” snorted Hawkeye. “That’s all it is. That kook from outer space hasn’t the power to smash a whole

planet. He's pulling a way-out bluff."

The phone rang at that moment. Captain America picked it up.

"I'm Dr. Thomas Polton of Mount Palomar Observatory," said the voice at the other end. "I thought you Avengers should hear this before I released it to authorities or to the public. An amazing celestial phenomenon has occurred...."

The speaker paused, as if still overwhelmed by what he had to say. "A giant comet has suddenly appeared from the remote regions beyond the solar system. It is racing toward earth and gathering tremendous speed. If it strikes earth...."

He took a breath and went on calmly—too calmly: "Collision with the giant comet would cause world-wide earthquakes and destroy half of civilization. And at its fantastic rate of acceleration, it will arrive within ten days."

His voice changed to a bewildered huskiness. "The whole thing is against all cosmic chance. It upsets all the laws of astrophysics, all the theories of galactic events. I know you will think I'm overimaginative, but it's almost as if that comet were being—well, being *drawn* toward earth by some powerful force."

"Thank you, doctor, for the warning." Captain America put down the phone slowly and faced the others. "There you have it. Karzz's supermagnet must be pulling down that giant comet. That's the way he plans to destroy earth."

"What were you saying before, Hawkeye?" said the Wasp.

“Like I was saying,” returned Hawkeye with a crooked grin, “that guy’s no kook and it’s not a bluff. His threat is for real.”

“So what are we waiting for?” demanded Goliath. “We go to Mount Everest, lick Karzz, wreck his magnet, and stop the comet. Simple as ABC.”

“Yes, except for D through Z,” warned Iron Man, which will be all the unknown superscience tricks he finely still have up his sleeve. It’ll be tough, with a capital T.”

“Just the Way We like it,” said Cap, drawing himself up, his blue eyes smoldering. “The Avengers have never yet met their Waterloo—and never will!”

“Corny,” said Hawkeye, “but true, Dad. Or as I would put it—we’ve never bombed yet against any overambitious adversary and we won’t goof off this time either. Let’s go.”

Captain America stared at him frostily. “I give the group decisions around here, Hawkeye. But since I can’t think of anything better to say”—he clapped Hawkeye on the shoulder—“*let’s go!*”

The five Avengers strode out of the exhibition hall and down a corridor to an elevator, which took them to the roof. Here rested a rocketplane similar to the X—15, but of an even more advanced design, which had come from the “invention factory” of Anthony Stark when he wasn’t. busy as Iron Man. It was specially designed to transport. the Avengers anywhere on earth in minimum travel time.

“If you run into Stark,” said Cap to Iron Man, “tell him thanks for his rocketplane.”

"I never seem to see him around," said Iron Man truthfully, smiling behind his mask. The other Avengers had never known that the Golden Avenger and Anthony Stark were the same man.

Within the craft, each man had his own individual foam-backed G-force seat. Iron Man sat at the controls, with Captain America as his co-pilot. For take-off at any time of the day or night, Stark's staff constantly kept the craft's fuel tanks filled with liquid fluorine and hydrogen, the most powerful chemical propellants known to rocketry.

Iron Man looked at the read-out dials of the automated check-out devices. "All systems go," he said. He activated the stud that programmed the proper trajectory into their computerized guidance system. Destination—Mount Everest." Then he barked "Ten...nine...eight..."

Knowing his job, Captain America plugged in the "live mode."

"Seven...six...five..."

Iron Man armed the fuel pumps.

"Four...three...two . . ."

Cap pressed the "non-abort" button.

"One...zero!"

Iron Man flipped the main engine toggle switch.

With a roar, the fiery propulsion engine burst forth, shoving the craft vertically upward from its upright gantry.

“All systems go,” gasped Captain America as the mounting G-forces rose to their peak. “Oxygen, green. Thrust, nominal.”

“Yaw, pitch and roll errors negative,” took up Iron Man. “Ship going into proper pitch-over angle into level flight, at ninety miles altitude. We’re on our way.”

Looking down through a big bottom-side window, they could all see the broad sweep of earth’s curvature below, and portions of the surface through banks of fleecy clouds—the views that many astronauts had exclaimed over as being awesomely “beautiful” and indescribable. Soon they were speeding over a great sea.

“The Pacific looks calm today,” ventured Hawkeye by way of small talk.

“The Atlantic,” corrected Cap.

“Huh?” grunted Hawkeye. “Well, you brain-boys made a mistake. If I know my geography, the Himalayas are nearer to America by going west around the world.”

“True,” nodded Iron Man. “But by going east, we take advantage of the earth’s rotation under us, which without any expenditure of fuel, rolls the Himalayas a thousand miles toward us during the flight. So in astronomical or spaceflight terms, the longest distance between two points is the shortest. We’ll be there in exactly 53 minutes and 33.6 seconds.”

“I dig it. But it’s crazyville.” A malicious gleam came into the bowman’s eye. “Say, Cap, back in your day during your first career, how long did it take t-o go halfway around the world—by ox cart?”

“You know we had planes then,” said Cap, but his voice muted in wonder as he recalled the primitive craft of the time. “The fastest piston-plane speed during World War II was 469 miles an hour, made by a German Messersehmidt. Later, when Howard Hughes made a flight around the world in less than eighty hours, it was considered a Jules Verne feat. Today, We can do it in about eighty minutes in orbit or by space trajectory.”

Soon after this, Iron Man warned: “Five minutes to landing. What’s our course of strategy, Cap?”

“I’ve been mulling it over,” the Spangled leader answered slowly. “It doesn't pay to reveal. all our forces at once—we should hold some in reserve. Karzz already has Iron Man’s number with his rust-ray; so the Wasp, Goliath, and I will confront our enemy first. Then, if reinforcements are needed, Hawkeye and Iron Man will join in!”

“Always robbing me of. glory,” grumbled Hawkeye. “What if you. three don’t. need -help?” He knocked his knuckles against his forehead as if chiding himself. “What am I worried about? Insect Girl, Elephant Boy, and Star Spangled Grampa...how can they win without help? So just call on the Ace Archer of the Ages and I’ll save the day. You can help too, Rust Pot.”

Iron Man said nothing, wincing at the word “rust.”

Witheringly, the Wasp spoke up. “If all your arrows had points as sharp as your Wit, Hawkeye, they’d be too dull to pierce a chunk of butter.”

If the others, thought Iron Man to himself, had met Karzz, they would not be bantering so light-heartedly. They would

find out soon enough what they were up against....

Chapter 6

Mountaintop Battle

Re-entry came now as they slammed into earth's atmosphere. The leading edges of the craft's wings began to glow cherry-red. But the molybdenum-tantalum alloy skin of the plane could withstand any air-friction temperature as they slanted down toward the towering white-capped Himalayas. When aerodynamic control came back, at mere supersonic speed, Iron Man skillfully maneuvered the rocketship through cloud banks and mists in the mountain system to keep hidden from watching eyes on Mount Everest.

A burst of rocket power at level flight sent them gliding down into a snowfield just below the rim of Everest's peak. They landed on the retractable skids that had been lowered, plowing up a spray of snow.

"Parkas, anyone?" asked Iron Man, pointing to the fur suits stashed in ceiling receptacles. "It's cold outside, Well below zero."

"I expect enough action," said Cap grimly "to be plenty Warm." The others nodded.

“Hawkeye and Iron Man will stay here as planned,” said Cap after they stepped out. “The other three of us will approach from three directions. Goliath and Wasp will assume their fighting forms at their own discretion. Okay, this is it....”

With an unvoiced exchange of glances that said “Good luck,” Goliath, Captain America, and the Wasp spread out a hundred yards apart and slowly advanced up toward the ramparts of the peak. They all shivered in the icy winds, but as Avengers they were inured to hardships and discomforts that would incapacitate other people.

Cautiously, they looked over the final ridge. The mighty magnet machine came into sight first, towering high and surrounded by its eerie nuclear glow. Then, as their sight came to eye level, they saw Karzz...facing them with a mocking smile, he swung his gaze to each of them.

“*Dumbkopfs*,” he greeted them sneeringly. “Did you think to sneak up on me unawares? My ultramonitor saw your craft approach and land. I presume you have come to play the same game Iron Man did. The game of Save the Earth, which you will lose.”

He waved at his monstrous machine.

“You won’t wreck my ultramagnet, which is pulling the giant comet into its proper collision course with earth.”

“Even from yards away, they could see his frosty eyes flash defiantly.

“Five against one, but I can easily hold you off. Earth science pitted against mine is like an atom pitted against a star.”

“We’ll see about that,” said Captain America gratingly, and then he raised his voice to shout, “Charge!”

Goliath had already assumed his giant ten-foot size, and he ran forward to pick up a huge boulder weighing at least a ton. Mighty muscles propelled it straight at Karzz, who turned to face the oncoming juggernaut without flinching.

Incredibly, striking the force-field aura in front -of him, the hard stone shattered into countless pieces.

“Yes, we know you’re shielded from the front,” came Captain America’s voice behind him. “But Goliath’s move was only to make you face that way, while I—”

Having raced across the wind-swept rock at his super-Olympic pace, Cap was already within reach. In one head-long plunge, he hurled his body straight at Karzz’s back, ready to send him off his feet with a knockout blow.

Klang!

Though Karzz had not turned, Cap’s shield met another kind of invisible shield and bounced back, nearly knocking out Cap himself.

Slowly turning, Karzz said softly, “After Iron Man taught me that I was vulnerable from the rear, naturally I fixed up my force-field shield to curve all *around* me. I am now invulnerable from all sides...*voilà!*”

His hand went to his belt. “Now, spangled Avenger, let us see if *your* shield can save you from my repertory of weapon rays.”

Lurid beams sprang forth—purple, red, green, blue—each carrying a different form of destruction. But Cap’s shield, coated by Anthony Stark’s inventive genius with a superalloy impervious to known forces, deflected them all. Cap drove forward again. and slammed into Karzz’s force-field aura with such muscle-driven power that Karzz—force-field and all—was shoved back several yards.

“Ach du lieber, what manner of man is that?” said Karzz, startled.

Cap was not just making a grandstand play. Out of the corner of his eye he had seen Goliath lumbering toward the giant magnet. He had distracted Karzz from turning and noticing.

Reaching the machine, Goliath put his great arms around one of the steel-truss support legs and heaved mightily. Could he topple the gigantic contraption? Metal groaned as Goliath grunted, straining every massive muscle.

Karzz heard, and whirled as Captain America bounced back again from his force-shield. “Colossal fool!” shouted Karzz. “My dis-beam will turn you into a puff of nothingness.”

He touched a stud on his belt and the ray sprang forth, disintegrating rock close to Goliath.

“My next shot,” Karzz warned, “will get you....*Yeow!*”

The last was a pained yell as something sharp jabbed into his hand before it pressed the dis-beam button. Something tiny flew before his face, buzzing angrily.

“Some earthly stinging insect,” he muttered. Then, his eyes opened wide. “But it seems to have human form!” he gasped.

“Meet the Wasp,” shrilled a thin voice. “A member of the Avengers. I have the ability, as you can see, of shrinking to insect size.”

“But my force-shield,” said Karzz in a puzzled tone. “How did you get past it?”

“Simple,” buzzed the tiny girl. “I suspected that it’s only a half-shell, stretching down -to the ground. But where the ground is uneven, there are small crevices under the edge of the shield. I slipped through one.”

She had been hovering before his face, vibrating her gauzy wings. Now she swooped down, calling back, “I stopped you from shooting your dis-beam at my man. And now, to keep you too busy to oppose the other Avengers . . .”

A series of howls came from the alien, and he began doing a wild dance as the Wasp’s sting-ray from her wrist device stabbed him again and again, all over his body.

Seeing this, Captain America jumped up and yelled: “Hawkeye! Iron Man! The Wasp is entertaining Karzz. This is our chance to wreck his ultramagnet. Come on.”

Hawkeye and Iron Man came charging, grinning at the cavorting figure of Karzz, trapped with the tiny stinging girl inside his own protective energy shell. Cap joined them, and they raced up to where Goliath was still heaving away but unable to overturn the huge machine.

“Karzz has only a flat shield above it,” said Iron Man, pointing to where another meteor, drawn down by magnetism, spanged off the force-field there. “He has no complete shell around. it, as with himself. That means we can wreck the unshielded machine from down here.”

With that, Iron Man rheostated up his transistorized power and shot a thin laser-beam from a finger of his right-hand gauntlet. The beam began slicing through steel struts as if through butter.

Hawkeye was already joyfully pulling an arrow from his quiver. “Watch the blast arrow do its stuff,” he sang, letting fly, whizzing between struts into the heart of the machine, the bulbous tip of the arrow exploded violently, shattering wires and causing short-circuit sparks.

Unable to help directly in the destruction, Captain America pointed out key sections of the machine for Iron Man and Hawkeye to aim for. “And keep "heaving, Goliath,” he called out. “The whole structure is weakening fast.”

With one last Herculean effort, the man-mountain lifted one support leg clear of the ground. Then, as Iron Man burned through a connecting cable, Goliath yanked the entire leg away.

“Timber!” yelled Cap, and they all scurried back, as the towering machine began to sway and slowly topple. It crashed full length with a resounding thud that shook the whole mountain. Electric discharges flashed. through the wreckage.

“I guess the stinging party is over,” sang out the Wasp, flitting down under the edge of Karzz’s force-shell and rejoining the Avengers. “Good work, boys. No more

supermagnetic force is pulling that giant comet toward earth."

"No, but it doesn't matter...now," snarled Karzz, approaching and rubbing the bumps the Wasp had raised on his face with her stinger. "I neglected to inform you that my ultramagnet needed only ten more minutes of operation since you arrived to pull the comet into an *unalterable* collision course with earth, at top speed."

He grinned devilishly. "And our battle took eleven minutes before you wrecked it. In other words, Avengers, you failed to stop the approaching earth doom. To quote from earth's French language...*c'est la guerre*."

The Avengers looked at each other, dismayed. Karzz had held the trump card. after all.

"But just why are you here to destroy earth?" queried Captain America.

"Yes," said Iron Man. "Yon boasted to me that you were Karzz the Conqueror, and spoke of the many galactic worlds that fell to you. Why are you switching from conquest to *destruction* of earth?"

"You may as well hear my story, since you can't stop me anyway," answered Karate, his frosty eyes mocking them. "I am from your future, some five thousand years from now. Call it the seventieth century, by earth reckoning. My home world, in that future time, was in the solar system of the star you call Vega. First, as a master-mind of warfare, I conquered, my own planet and people. Then, building a space warfleet, I swept out and took over all of our solar system. But even that did not satisfy me."

He waved an arm dramatically, as if to include the universe.

"I organized an inter-galactic fleet of war rockets and drove out among the nearby stars. World after world fell before me and became part of my grand cosmic empire. At each planet it was *veni, vidi, vici*."

"I came, I saw, I conquered," murmured Iron Man, as if he were in school.

"Alexander, Napoleon, and Hitler were pikers compared to you," said Hawkeye. "Throw in Genghis Khan too."

Ignoring him, the alien Warlord went on. "In time, spreading out from my corner of the Milky Way, I ruled half the galaxy---a total of ten thousand inhabited worlds."

"Ten thousand Worlds?" murmured Cap in awe. It was on a scale so vast the human mind could hardly comprehend it.

"I was still young," continued Karzz, "and my ambition was no less than conquest of the entire galaxy with its twenty thousand inhabited planets—but something blocked my plans."

"Aha!" spoke up Hawkeye. "You ran into a World tougher than yours, with a warfleet you couldn't lick, eh?"

"*Jawohl*," spat out Karzz, his face darkening. "This other world had a technology superior to my own. They had superscience weapons that decimated my fleet, crushed my power, and smashed my hard-won empire."

"That world," whispered Cap, suddenly drawing in his breath..."was it called—earth?"

The others started, in blinding insight.

Four Earth Dooms

“*Da*,” said Karzz, like a Russian, in an intense voice. “It was your own earth. of the seventieth century, five thousand years from now, that did—or will—smash my drive for galactic domination.” He glared. at them with infinite hatred. “You are the ancestors of the future earthians who are destined to be my stumbling block. It is the human race alone that could stand in my way.”

“So you have come back in time merely for revenge against us?” said Cap, shaking his head. “Because our far-future descendants licked you, you’ve come to give us a bad. time.”

“*Nein*,” Karzz came back sharply. “It would hardly be that trivial in my aims. Don’t you understand”? If I destroy earth of the twentieth century, it will *never exist* in the seventieth century. Its powerful warfleet and titanic superweapons won’t be there to oppose me. So, when I return. to the future, my conquest of the galaxy will *succeed*, Where it failed before.”

The Avengers stood stunned at the enormity of the concept. .

“But that’s *changing history*,” protested Cap. “How can you tamper with inexorable fate that way? If earth *did* exist in the future and did defeat you, how can that event be wiped out? Once a thing has happened, it can’t . . . Well, it can’t *unhappen*.”

Karzz sneered, as though he were talking to children. “Of course your primitive minds know nothing of science to come, and future discoveries about *branching time*. Let try to explain as I would to *bambinos*.”

“He drew a breath and went on. “At any crossroads in history, such as the outcome of a war, two different acts of destiny can occur, naturally. If the war is won by one side, their ‘real’ world goes on. The other outcome, where the war is lost, is merely a branch of destiny that never really occurs. *Nicht wahr?*”

“An ‘if’ world,” nodded Cap, “or a ‘parallel’ world.”

“But if you travel back in time,” pursued Karzz, “and *alter* the outcome of that war, the so-called real world becomes the if world, while the if world then becomes the real one.”

“That’s double-talk, you time creep,” piped up Hawkeye. “You’re just juggling paradoxes around and coming up zero. How can something that is already real suddenly change and become unreal?”

“By the great chrono-conversion equation,” returned Karzz imperturbably, “Which will be formulated—let’s see in your earth year of 1975. It is similar to Einstein’s famous equation of converting matter into energy, and vice versa.

And just as matter and energy are interchangeable, so are the 'real' and the 'parallel' worlds."

Cap digested that staggering thought. "You mean that if you succeeded in destroying earth and wiping out the human race, here in the twentieth century, all the future events in which they took part will simply disappear out of history, as you knew it in the seventieth century?"

"Why not?" said Karzz blandly. "The *parallel* universe, in which earth is destroyed before its prime, then becomes the *real* universe."

Shrugging, he went on impatiently, "But *tempus fugit*. Whether you understand or care to believe is no concern of mine. The truth is that by wiping out earth today I will insure myself becoming the emperor of the Milky Way galaxy in the seventieth century."

"Easier said than done, though," retorted Cap. "A giant comet smashing into earth might wreck most of civilization and annihilate many millions of the human race, but there will be survivors to carry on—and to become strong again in the seventieth century."

"The giant comet," Karzz informed them in ominous tones, "is only the first of *four* world-doom catastrophes which I shall cause on earth. All four superdisasters combined will make sure that not one human being remains alive on your world. *Verstehen?*"

"Four dooms!" gasped the Wasp. "You heartless beast! Willing to kill—to *murder*—three billion people! I should sting you until you cry for mercy!"

Karzz winced and stepped back a pace, but Cap said, "Forget it, Wasp. That wouldn't stop him. The question is"—he turned to Karzz—"what are the other three dooms you plan?"

Karzz grinned maliciously, cunningly. "I would indeed be an idiot to tip my hand. And besides, it will be more agonizing for you Avengers to face unknown holocausts. However, I'll tell you this much. The other three world-wrecking forces I've planned will involve fire, water, and air. Guess the rest it you can. Now I will leave Mount Everest and Watt myself elsewhere on earth, to launch doom number two. *Adios, amigos.*"

He pressed a stud on his belt and a plastic bubble materialized out of thin air and surrounded him. Lightly as a soap bubble, it then rose in the air and gathered speed.

"Follow him, Wasp," whispered Cap. "Let us know where he goes next and what deviltry he cooks up."

"Right, Cap," piped Wasp, buzzing away after the receding plastic vehicle and the leering alien.

"Well, we've got our work cut out for us, Avengers," said Cap, looking at his three male companions grimly.

"We save worlds every morning before breakfast," said Hawkeye flippantly, to hide the gnawing horror within him.

"But this is even greater," added Goliath thoughtfully. "Not only saving the world today but also saving the whole galaxy and twenty thousand other worlds in the future."

They stared solemnly at each other, and even Hawkeye couldn't think of a wisecrack for that.

Following the plastic bubble, the Wasp expected a long journey ahead but, surprisingly, Karzz turned downward and landed in a valley. Stepping out, he unhooked a small microphone from his belt and spoke into it.

“Calling the future,” he said casually, as if putting through a phone call. But the Wasp, overhearing, realized he was not merely calling someone thousands of miles away but thousands of *years* away.

“Attention, my faithful aides,” continued Karzz. “You sent me the ultramagnet, which did its work nobly. Now I want you to send the three other machines to the twentieth century, launching three more earth dooms simultaneously.”

He paused to unroll a map that had been folded in his belt, then resumed. “Send the Infrared Beamer to the Antarctic, on your map of ancient earth, at the spot marked X. Have the Vulcan Machine materialize on that marked island in the South Pacific.”

Wasp wondered suddenly, why an alien should be using an earthly language instead of his own native tongue. But then she realized, listening carefully, that there was no voice at all. He was in reality beaming telepathic waves into his future-phone. Thought-words, of course, were universal, understood by any intelligent mind. That was why the Wasp could eavesdrop on the alien.

“Last,” Karzz was saying, “transport the Storm Satellite Launcher to the Sahara Desert location marked on your map.”

Grim curiosity tantalized the listening insect-girl.

Infrared Beamer...Vulcan Machine...Storm Satellite!

How would those three superscience devices from the future create havoc on earth? Would it be something even more devastating than the ultramagnet pulling down a giant comet to strike earth?

Sitting inside a buttercup flower near Karzz, the Wasp waited to hear more. "As you know," came from the alien, "the Infrared Beamer will be used to—"

But his words were drowned out by a large buzz and a huge bumblebee came searing straight toward the flower, evidently seeking its sweet nectar. The Wasp didn't want to tangle with an insect much bigger than she was and she flew away to light on the next flower. But the angry bumblebee zoomed after her, obviously considering this patch of blossoms his private territory, from which to drive out all other poaching creatures.

As the buzzing bully put on speed in chasing her, the Wasp realized she couldn't escape his enormous stinger, which would sooner or later jab her through and through like a spear.

"I'll fix you," she thought, willing herself to grow. Seconds later, back to normal size, she swung the flat of her hand and knocked the surprised bumblebee back into some prickly weeds. "That for you, bumblebug," she thought triumphantly.

She had been intent on this insect-world skirmish, but suddenly she noticed two frosty blue eyes turning her way,

startled at this abrupt appearance of a full-grown woman out of thin air. She was now exposed to Karzz!

“The Wasp girl of the Avengers,” he hissed. “How much have you heard? Well, you won’t hear any more...” He was already pressing his belt-stud. to release a killing ray.

Desperately the Wasp threw herself full length among tall Weeds. Karzz raked the green patch with his ray, converting it into blackened ashes. But no human body was there, only a tiny insect that had flitted away unnoticed.

“Whew,” thought the Wasp, “I shrank down again just in time. I’d better not hang around here any more. Karzz will be on the Watch for any insect coming near him. I’ll make a bee line back to Avenger headquarters and report what I did hear.”

But it was a long way back to America for a pseudo-insect that could only fly at forty miles an hour, top speed. The Wasp darted high in the air and looked in all directions.

“Ah, an airport to the south, probably in northern India. I’ll hitch a ride there.”

And so it was that an Air India jetliner carried a tiny stowaway to Paris. From there, the Wasp transferred to an overseas plane bound for New York.

“Being an insect has its advantages,” she said to herself. “No fare to pay, and all kinds of seats—on the ceiling.”

At Avenger headquarters, to which the men had meanwhile returned via their rocketplane, they were waiting impatiently.

“If she doesn’t come back...” groaned Goliath. for the tenth time, but they all forgave him. Suddenly, all of them turned in unison, as an insect buzzed through. a window purposely left open, and began enlarging in mid-air, to land on her feet as a full-sized girl.

“Nice two-point landing, eh?” she said with a smile.

“Skip the p-l-a-n-e talk,” said Hawkeye, “and give us p-l-a-i-n talk. Did you overhear any plans of Karzz the Conqueror?”

“Yes, some,” the Wasp answered, and she recited her story. When she was through, Captain. America banged his fist against the wall, cracking off plaster.

“Easy, Winghead,” admonished Iron Man. “Our good friend Anthony Stark donated this hangout to the Avengers, and it costs him. for repairs. Go punch Hawkeye if you have to let off steam.”

“Oh, thanks,” grunted Hawkeye. “*That* won't cost Stark anything—it'll probably just cost me a handful of loose teeth.” He glowered at Iron Man, then at Cap. “What’s eating you?”

“It’s just not knowing Karzz’s full plot,” explained Cap. “All we know is that earth disasters involving water, fire and air will occur. But how will those three machines he’s...uh...importing from the future do it?”

“Worse yet,” spoke up Goliath, “we only know vaguely where each machine will operate—in the Antarctic, in the South Seas, and in the Sahara. All of those are big places if you don’t know the exact spot.”

“And for that reason,” said Cap, “we can’t turn this job over to the authorities or the military. You can’t send cops or soldiers halfway across the world to an indefinite place. This calls for specialized skills and training. Therefore, it’s a job for the Avengers only.”

“You’re not just beating your gums, Leader Man,” agreed Hawkeye. “But which of the three earth menaces do we tackle first?”

“That brings up the most significant thing,” said Iron Man thoughtfully: “that Karzz, according to the Wasp, will launch his other three earth-Wreckers *simultaneously*.”

“Right,” nodded Cap. “And that means we have to split up and try to stop all three at the same time, as soon as possible. Let’s see, we’ll pair off like this: Iron Man and Hawkeye to the Antarctic, Goliath and Wasp to the South Seas, and...”

“And. you alone for the Sahara?” put in Hawkeye. “Come off it, Dad. Are you trying to pretend you’re as good as any two of us?”

“No, I’m also pairing off,” Cap said with a grin, “With Steve Rogers.”

“Hoo Boy,” groaned Hawkeye. “Alter-ego jokes yet.”

“Well, somebody .has to go it solo,” Cap reminded him.

“But look, if any of you others finish your job soon enough, you can rush and give me a hand. Okay?”

They all nodded agreement.

“Since time is of the essence,” Cap went on, “I’ll deliver you all by rocketplane first, then I’ll head for the Sahara.” His face went grim. “But we’d better be in top condition for the most important mission in Avenger history. Takeoff will be in six hours. That gives us all time for some sleep, a shower, a hot meal, and checkout of individual equipment. We’ll all take survival kits along, of course. We may be on the job for long hours, if not for days.”

He paused, his eyes going bleak.

“The giant comet that was pulled toward earth Will arrive in ten days, Karzz revealed. His other three earth dooms must be timed to occur, or reach their peak, at that same date. In short, if we fail, the end of the world will come before this month is over.”

They all winced.

“The deadline of doom,” murmured Iron Man, “is what we Avengers are racing against this time.”

“And not only doom for twentieth-century earth,” Goliath reminded them, “but for all the thousands of galactic worlds in the future.”

“If we fail,” added the Wasp with a tremor in her voice, “we lose the world and Karzz wins the universe.”

“It’ll serve him right,” drawled Hawkeye. “If all the people on those twenty thousand other worlds are ornery jackasses like humans on earth? then poor Karzz will have some mess to rule over. I’d let him get away with it except for one thing...”

He paused to strike a pose. "I don't want history to be robbed of my lifelong exploits and fabulous feats of archery. But how can I perform them in the years ahead if earth ends this month? So, between Karzz and me, Karzz has to go. I have spoken."

"Good boy," commended Cap. "Your banter lightened the moment, Hawkeye."

"Banter?" The astonished bowman glared at him. "I was never more serious in my life."

"You know," muttered Goliath to Cap, "Sometimes I don't know if that "guy is ribbing us or not."

Chapter 8

Ice Menace

It was night when a sleek Winged bullet rocketed southward, reeling off thousands of miles and continuing past the southern tip of South America over the vast watery wastes at the bottom of the world. Only one hour later, night gave way to day as they passed into the months-long polar daytime.

Ramparts of glistening ice rose on the horizon, spreading to the right and left as far as the eye could see. The White Continent...Icebox of the World...Frozen Hell...it had been called many things in the past by hard-bitten explorers.

An enormous ice cap covered a land one and a half times the size of the United States. Uninhabited for countless ages, Antarctica had only within the past decade acquired a population of a few hundred permanent residents in scientific outposts.

"Belgium has a population density of 758 people per square mile," commented Goliath, "while Antarctica has 1200 square miles per person. How are we ever going to find one small being, Karzz, in that immensity?" At the

controls, Cap angled the rocketplane down and flipped the toggle switch for the retractable skids to start lowering.

“A good question,” he admitted. “However, Iron Man has flying locomotion and can quickly search in all directions from any single point, so I’ll let him and Hawkeye down at the center of the continent.”

“That’s about -the coldest spot, too,” said Hawkeye with a shiver, and he drew his parka’s furred hood over his head. “Iron Pants is lucky, Wearing a heated tin suit. For me, it’s just Shivering.”

“Keep talking and you won’t freeze,” said the Wasp soothingly. “I estimate the hot air you produce in one hour could heat a city.”

“Don’t bug me, Bug Girl,” retorted Hawkeye.

With a roar of the braking rockets at the nose, the rocketship slid smoothly to a stop in a snowfield. ‘With compact survival packs on their backs, Iron Man and the fur-suited Hawkeye stepped out into the icy blast.

“Good luck!” came from the rocketplane as it soared away again, rising steeply and vanishing in the blue sky.

Iron Man looked at his built-in wrist thermometer. “Hmm...only forty-seven degrees below zero,” he informed. Hawkeye. “A comparatively balmy day for the Antarctic.”

“Anybody who calls that balmy is balmy,” said. the archer. “let’s not just stand here and freeze by inches. Get going, and take me along.”

As agreed on before, Iron Man hooked a short length of chain from his belt to Hawkeye's parka belt, then took off. The jet-thrusts from his boots formed frozen-vapor plumes behind them.

"Keep your eyes peeled in all directions," said the Golden Avenger. "If the Infrared Beamer, whatever it is, is anywhere near the size his ultramagnet was on Mount Everest, We ought t-o spot it miles away."

But they saw nothing, though Iron Man swung in ever-widening circles that gradually covered large areas in the interior of the ice-locked continent.

"As bare as Mother Hubbard's cupboard," Hawkeye granted between cold blue lips.

Iron Man suddenly swung on a straightaway. "I have a hunch that Karzz may be operating along the coast instead of in the interior," he said. Upon reaching the shoreline of sheer icy cliffs towering a mile high in places Iron Man and his passenger swung to follow the edge bordering the cold seas. They passed high over several scientific outposts, immediately recognizable by their quonset huts or low wooden barracks.

After skirting Antarctica's rim. for hundreds -of miles, Iron Man turned sympathetically toward Hawkeye, whose skin was frosted, while tiny icicles hung from his hood over his eyes.

"I'm snug in my steel air-conditioned suit but you're exposed to the frigid winds, Hawkeye. Want to land and build a fire to warm up?"

“N-no, I f-f-feel gr-great,” lied Hawkeye through chattering teeth. “The Wasp always s-says I’m c-c-cold-blooded anyway so th-this is my n-natural element. Keep going, Shell Head. I’m t-t-t-tough.”

Occasionally they passed a penguin flock, strutting comically. At times, skua gulls flapped past. No other animal was seen, for even the Arctic fox and polar bear would succumb in this bitter land where temperatures could at times plunge to 130 degrees below zero. where bare, wind-swept mountain peaks rose above the monotonous Whiteness, straggling green lichens and mosses grew, and a few hardy insects were known to survive on that food.

Looking down, Iron Man suddenly saw a strange thing. “Look, Hawkeye. Tractor tread marks, but how big!”

Hawkeye gave a long low whistle as he squinted. “The tracks are a hundred fee-t wide. What kind of icemobile could be that big?”

They saw the answer soon, toll-owing the trail over the horizon. There, moving along in strange nuclear-powered silence, was a tractor-tread “tank” as big as a Warehouse. On top was a mast surmounted by a huge searchlight—from which shone forth no light at all. Yet beyond at the coast, the ice cliffs were melting into a Niagara of water that cascaded boilingly down into the Antarctic sea.

Iron Man flipped over a chest-stud, activating his long-range Telstar radiocom transmitter. “Calling Captain America. Located Infrared Beamer. Will try to sabotage it. Over and out.”

“Infrared rays are heat-beams, of course,” said Hawkeye. “Karzz is using that gizmo to melt the edges of the ice cap,

but Why? If he wipes out a few scientific camps on the way, how would that be an earth-doom gimmick?"

"One way to find out is to land," said Iron Man, swooping down; "and I mean on the machine itself."

He had seen the plastic bubble "pilot's room" at the front end of the Cyclopean tank. Within it sat Karzz himself, manipulating a complex electronic control board. He seemed too preoccupied to notice the two flying figures that landed feet-first nearby on the hull.

"Let's take a quick potshot at him right off," muttered Hawkeye, pulling an arrow from his quiver with numbed fingers.

"Right," agreed Iron Man. "Maybe we can surprise him and blast him to Kingdom Come before he knows what happened."

"Three...two...one...*fire!*" was Iron Man's countdown.

Hawkeye let loose with the nuclear-tipped arrow, whose miniaturized explosive power was a fraction of that of an A-bomb, but still had enough blast force to pulverize a battleship.

At the same time, Iron Man extended one gauntlet and let fly with five whining rays from his fingertips, each an energy beam in different octaves of the electro-magnetic scale, with enough combined power to shatter a mountain.

The exploding arrow and multiple smash-beams reached the plastic bubble at the same time, creating a pyrotechnical display that hurt the eyes. But when the smoke cleared, nothing had changed.

“Not even a scratch on his plastic bubble,” cursed Hawkeye. “Not an atom knocked off.”

And now Karzz was staring out at them with a mocking leer. His amplified voice came from a horn above the bubble.

“*Bon jour!* I expected Avengers here sooner or later. To satisfy your natural curiosity, this Infrared Beamer was constructed on my home planet by my cohorts, using seventieth-century science technology, then it was tele-transported across the time barrier in the wink of an eye to twentieth-century earth.”

“What is your aim with this buggy?” demanded Hawkeye. “Why melt ice here? Or are you going to make ice cubes for a dinosaur-sized cocktail? If this is a menace to earth, I’m a monkey’s uncle’s second cousin.”

“Then harken, anthropoid throwback,” returned Karzz bitinglly, “to some Antarctic statistics. The south-polar ice cap holds ninety percent of the frozen water on earth, a total of eleven million cubic miles. If all that were melted to flood into the swollen oceans of earth, it would raise the general water level six hundred feet.

Iron Man and Hawkeye gasped.

“This would drown seventy-five per cent of earth’s major seaports under the new sea level,” Karzz recited, “and would flood inland for a thousand miles in many non-mountainous areas. The dry-land area. of earth would be reduced. to only the highlands and mountain chains, about one-tenth of. the present land area.”

Karzz grinned mirthlessly at them. "Needless to say, at least half the human race would drown, and the rest would starve, with "all farmlands sunken underwater."

iron Man controlled his shuddering nerves. "All well and good, but it will take you a hundred years to melt all the ice down by circling the Antarctic coast time after time."

"True," agreed the alien conqueror from the future. "But underneath this Infrared Beamer is a projector radiating a 'heat current'—I can explain it in no simpler terms—that is pouring all through the ice and building up its charge. When this reaches its peak, enough heat will be stored. ' to melt the entire ice cap, releasing trillions of gallons of newly formed. water into the ocean system of earth."

"That would also create a gigantic tidal wave and smash all ships at sea!" gasped Iron Man.

"Precisely," gloated Karzz. "I've thought of everything."

"Except one thing," barked Hawkeye. "That two Avengers will wreck your giant water-wagon, one way or another...starting now!"

"You will never have the chance," came back coldly, "for you will be wiped out . . . now!"

"Get behind me, Hawkeye!" yelled iron Man. tensely. "My armor is impervious to any of his ray-forces."

"Except one," reminded Karzz, "the rust-ray." And touching his belt studs, Karzz shot forth the same ray that on Mount Everest had begun to crumble away Iron Man's suit, layer by layer.

iron Man did not retreat, with Hawkeye huddled behind him. He took the full brunt of the droning ray—yet nothing happened.

“You’ll notice,” said Iron Man evenly, “that no red dust is forming through superfast rust action. You see, Karzz, before coming here I did some lab work and devised a plastic-spray coating to protect my steel suit from your ray.”

“Clever,” came Karzz’s microphonic voice in grudging admiration. “Well, no matter. If I cannot destroy you, neither can you bother me within my impenetrable Infrared Beamer machine.”

“We’ll see about that, you overconfident creep,” scoffed Hawkeye. Turning to Iron Man he said, “Fly me in the air I’ve got a couple of fancy arrows to try on his motorized tin can.”

Iron Man complied, soaring hundred feet up with Hawkeye. “But can you shoot while dangling in the air like this?” he asked.

“It’s some trick,” admitted Hawkeye, trying to fit an arrow to his bow while his body twisted in the wind. But finally he aimed downward.

Whung....

“The acid arrow,” said Hawkeye. “Its head contains energized radioactive fluoric acid that can eat through glass or stone.”

The arrow landed on the top of the machine with a wet thud, spreading a yardwide stain all around. A bubbling hiss arose, but as the moments passed the fumes danced away impotently.

"All it did was clean dirt off' the metal," said Iron Man, shaking his head.

"What kind of superalloy is that?" growled Hawkeye, stunned. "But we've got to get inside and sabotage that jalopy. Here goes with my diamond-drill arrow."

Spang....

Down sped a bulky arrow whose whirling diamond point was driven by a tiny transistorized electric motor. It could drill its way through ten inches of armor plate while barely being slowed. down.

When it met the hull below, it poised on end, grinding away while upheld by the torque of the spin. But gradually its speed diminished. Wobbling like a top that was running down, it finally fell flat.

Hawkeye's face also fell, while a string of imprecations came from his lips. His fury was not lightened by the mocking, amplified voice of Karzz from his plastic bubble: "Why waste your ingenious arrows, bow-twanger? My machine is coated with a layer of neutronium, a metal made of densely packed neutrons, and ten times harder than mere diamond. Your Stone Age devices are pitiful toys."

"That clown from the outer cosmos doesn't know it," rasped Hawkeye, "but his deadliest weapons are those cornball clichés. If people heard enough of them, the human race would commit mass suicide."

"My turn," said Iron. Man, jetting them both away from the mighty machine. "See that glacier ahead? Karzz is going to skirt close past one side of it...and I've got ideas."

Before reaching the glacier, Iron Man deposited Hawkeye on a flat snowfield. "I'll leave you here. This is a one-man job."

"Give him the Works," Hawkeye called after the flying figure.

The Golden. Avenger soared above the gigantic glacier, beside which even Karzz's great machine was a tiny mite. All the while, Iron Man had been rheostating up his power-units. His finger poised over a push button on his chest controls.

"Here goes," he muttered. "An ultrasonic sound wave above the range of human. hearing, but rated at a million decibels. Nothing crystalline can stand up against it."

As the invisible vibrations struck the glistening glacier, giant cracks appeared at the top and spread. fanwise down the sides. Awesomely, in majestic slow motion, the colossal chunk of ice split with a thunderclap, collapsing into a landslide of pieces bigger than houses.

Countless megatons of the crystalline debris crushed down squarely on top of the Infrared Beamer as it churned past, until it was buried from sight.

Circling in the air, Iron Man held his breath and listened. Not a sound. came from under the ice heap. "I think you hit the jackpot," came Hawkeye's thin shout from the distance. "You put Karzz on ice—for good!"

RrrrRRRRR.....

The silence was broken by the sound of tractor treads grinding powerfully. Ice chunks were hurled aside as the seventieth-century tank came crawling out from under broken glacier.

“I—I don’t believe it,” gasped Iron Man, in devastated disappointment. “Not even a dent or a scratch.”

A derisive chuckle, amplified into stentorian volume, came rolling from the machine. “Was there something in my way?”

But now the alien’s voice -turned ugly. “I see I’ll have eliminate you two. You annoy me, like mosquitoes.”

The huge machine suddenly wheeled around and straight for a small figure standing unprotected the snowfield. The treads crunched forward, gathering speed.

“Hawkeye!” screeched Iron Man in horror.

“Great balls o’ fire!” choked Hawkeye, rooted to the spot as the machine loomed closer, like a juggernaut. “Karzz is going to run me down!”

The archer broke from his paralysis of fear and began running, futilely. The churning behemoth behind him gained steadily.

Like a comet, the Golden Avenger was streaking down from the sky, piling on all the jet power he could muster. But he had a longer way to go than the machine, to reach Hawkeye.

Death flew alongside Iron Man. Which of them would reach Hawkeye first?

Chapter 9

Sunken Sabotage

Meanwhile, Captain. America Was driving the rocketplane away from the South Pacific. He had left Goliath and the Wasp on a centrally located island, whence their search for the third earth doom would begin.

As the speck disappeared in the blue skies, the Wasp turned to Goliath. "What a search we've got ahead of us, High Pockets! There are hundreds -of islands, small and large, in this group. On which one is Karzz the Conqueror operating?"

"He's probably not even here yet," Goliath answered. "Remember that on our flight here, Cap picked up Iron Man.'s radio call, telling how they had found Karzz there with his Infrared Beamer. So he can hardly be here with his Vulcan Machine."

"Then that means we have to Wait for him," said the girl, happily. "In that case, Big Blue Eyes, why don't we pitch a little woo?" '

Her arms encircled him and her lips drew close to his, temptingly. But his lips began to move upward, out of reach.

“Oh, you spoiler!” she pouted. “Why did you shoot up to your ten-foot size and frustrate me?”

“Because this isn’t the time or place for the Romeo and Juliet bit,” retorted the giant. “After all, ‘We’re on Avenger business.’”

“Oh, fine!” said the disappointed girl. “You and your sense of duty! Here we are alone on a desert isle—well, a tropical isle—and what’s on your mind? Anything but romantic thoughts. Sometimes I could kick you, Henry Pym.”

“You couldn’t reach that high,” said Goliath with grin. Then he became serious. “Listen, Wasp. Its possible that Karzz came here first, before going to Antarctica, and left the Vulcan machine operating under automatic or remote controls. So -our hunt should begin immediately. That’s why there’s no time for moonlight and roses.”

“Okay,” sighed the girl. “What’s the plan?”

Goliath was now shrinking back to human size, but he didn’t stop there. “Shrink down with me, Wasp,” he called from her knee. “In insect size, we can visit the islands one by one and find out what’s cooking in the alien’s pot.”

Willing herself to reduce, the girl also began shrinking until both of them stood in a towering forest—of grass.

Almost immediately, a lumbering tiger-beetle charged them. from under a rock.

“Look out!” yelled the Wasp.

The tiny Ant-Man, with the strength of a Goliath, met the charge with a swinging fist that cracked the beetle on its snout. It paused dizzily. This gave the Ant-Man time to grasp its hard shell at one side and heave mightily. The beetle flipped over on its back, helplessly waving its legs in the air.

“Have fun working your way upright,” said the miniature Goliath. He turned to the Wasp-girl. “You can shoot out wings at will and fly, but I need a flying steed of the insect world, like the Flying Ant I once used.”

He pointed upward. “And why not a classy type like the one up on that flower?”

Above them, a butterfly drank of the blossom’s nectar, its gauzy wings slowly opening and closing, oblivious to the world in its ecstasy of feasting. Putting a finger to his lips, Ant-Man began climbing the stalk of a nearby flower that towered higher than where his quarry ‘perched. ’

When he reached the topmost blossom, he stood on the petals and leaped, straight down onto the butterfly’s back. Like a bucking bronco, the startled butterfly flapped into the air, twisting and darting wildly.

“You won’t shake me off,” sang out the Ant-man, his legs straddling its thorax and his hands holding onto the edge of its carapace. After the butterfly had exhausted itself, the micro-man reached and seized its two feathery antennae at the base, letting them slide through his hands until he gripped the ends tightly.

“My reins,” he called down. “The butterfly will be sensitive to the slightest pull right or left and turn that way.”

He demonstrated, making the butterfly turn gracefully into an immelmann turn and then zigzag gently on even keel.

The Wasp now came flying alongside under her own power.

“If it were a horsefly,” she said in a tinkling voice, “you’d be a horseman. What are you on a butterfly—a buttermen?”

The Ant-Man smiled wanly. “Nice try, Wasp. But I can’t be cheered up. There’s too much at stake here. Now, let’s go. There’s nothing suspicious on this island, so it’s on to the next one.”

Guiding his gaily colored mount upward, the Ant-Man headed for a nearby island, with the Wasp pacing him. A prevailing breeze increased their speed and blew them swiftly across the intervening waters.

They circled over the small atoll, finding it barren of any human habitation or any man-made structure.

“We drew a blank here,” said the Ant-Man. “On to the next island...and the next...”

They lost count of the tropical isles they visited, some inhabited by natives, some thriving with modern industry, but none of them harboring the slightest sign of an alien machine at work.

They had no survival kits along, for they could not have reduced those to tiny size. But they drank of flower nectars, sweet and satisfying. And when tired, they slept for a short time snugly in tulip-like blossoms, cushioned with soft pollen. All the Avengers had trained themselves to do

without sleep for longer stretches of time than other people could endure.

"Feeding his butterfly mount at a lily-like "drinking trough," the Ant-Man felt discouraged. "Are we on a wild-goose chase trying to locate our alien friend?"

Flying over the next island, they looked down into a crater. "Many of these islands are volcanic in origin," the pointed out. "Very few are live volcanoes, however. "This one is deader than a doornail. . . ."

BLAMMMM!

At that moment, with a deafening blast, the supposedly dead volcano split open and erupted flame and smoke.

“Quick!” gasped the Ant-Man. “Fly higher.”

Gaining altitude, they escaped the molten lava discharge that now scorched through the air and showered the surrounding Waters with fiery sparks. .

The Ant-man jerked his winged steed around as another blast sounded to the north. “Another volcano erupting,” he said, and then stared -incredulously. One after another, a string of volcanic islands stretching into the distance blew their tops.

“Great heavens!” cried the Wasp. “It’s as if a string of firecrackers were being set off.”

“Right” yelled back the Ant-Man above the thunderous din. “And set off by...Karzzz, the Conqueror!”

“What?”

“The other three dooms, he said, would involve water, air, and fire. Well, if this isn't ‘fire’ I’ll eat it.” He snapped his fingers. “Idiots, that’s what we are. The clue was right in front of -our noses all the time. Wasp, where does the name Vulcan come from?”

“Why, the ancient legend in Greek mythology of an underground god...Ah, I get what you’re driving at. Karzz

and his Vulcan Machine must be down below.”

“Right,” said Ant-Man again. “And that first volcanic island that erupted may mark where he’s operating. Let’s go. We’ve got to take a chance and run through the fiery hail of the eruption, down to the island itself.”

As they flew downward, great globs of molten lava sailed by, along with a blast of heated air.

“We’ll be cooked alive by the time we get there,” gasped the Wasp, her skin red from heat. “Maybe we haven’t got a chance.”

“Keep going!” snapped the Ant-Man. “Our small size is our salvation. It’s like insects flitting through a hail of shells and bullets, with little chance of a direct hit.”

And so, somewhat the worse for wear, they gained the sanctuary of the island’s jungle, at a spot where no forest fire had yet started, and where no rivers of molten lava had flowed.

“Down there,” pointed the Ant-Man, “is a cave. It all adds up that Karzz is here, underground. In we go....”

They were thankful for the dim coolness of the cave and the outside thunders of the volcanic barrage were muted as they went in deeper. When the outside sounds were nearly inaudible, the Wasp stopped to hover in the air with a hand to her ear.... The Ant-Man heard it too.

Ahead of them sounded a deep low rumble. “It sounds like a machine all right, a big one,” said the Ant-Man excitedly. “Time now to switch to human size and explore the cave system further.”

Moments later, in their normal stature, Henry Pym waved farewell to the butterfly he had been riding before. Then he took the Wasp's hand and trotted along the winding passageways that linked a maze of natural caves under this island.

The rumble grew louder, and became a low roar. The tunnels widened out now, and they eventually stepped into a huge central cavern from which the sound reverberated. At first, in the dim underground lighting, they could see nothing except a vague hulking shape.

Then it took form as a pattern of machined parts—huge pipes, an enormous piston pump, a bulging chamber that glowed with nuclear fires, and what looked like an electronic computer system controlling it all.

“The Vulcan Machine,” breathe. the Wasp. She clutched Pym's arm in sudden alarm. “Look...handling the master push buttons . . .”

“Karzz?” muttered Pym. “This is mighty peculiar. How could Iron Man report him in Antarctica, if he's here?”

Chapter 10

Doom Machine

Yet Karzz was still in Antarctica! And still driving his monstrous tractor tank at the fleeing figure of Hawkeye, dashing madly but hopelessly across the smooth snowfields with no slightest haven in sight.

And the Golden Avenger, diving at meteoric speed, had no chance to reach his doomed companion—at least not in person.

But from his right arm's hollow metal sleeve shot forth a steel spring that uncoiled to its full length of a hundred feet. At its end was a hook that caught expertly in Hawkeye's belt. The archer was yanked upward just as an enormous spiked tread rolled crunchingly over the spot he had vacated.

Reeling in the steel spring, Iron Man said, "My timer shows that was just -three-tenths of a second before contact between you and the treads."

"A closer shave," said Hawkeye, only the slightest tremor in his voice betraying how shaken up he was, "was never claimed even by a TV razor advertiser." He took a deep

breath. "Sorry, Iron Head, for gypping you out of collecting my insurance."

"What insurance?" retorted the G-olden Avenger. "You know quite well no insurance company would be idiotic enough to insure any of us. The Avengers live the most dangerous lives on earth. Even Lloyds of London reneged."

Iron Man was just chatting to allow Hawkeye to regain his shattered composure. It was not easy for a man to be snatched from the jaws of death by a split hairline of time. But then he saw the bowman's lip curling in his usual devil-may-care smirk.

"Thanks for the assist, Rusty joints," Hawkeye said. "I'll let you hand me my arrows some time when I'm firing with my unfailing skill." A black frown swept over his face. "Which reminds me, I'm going to get that outer-space thug right now. Ever hear of the old soft underbelly deal?"

"You mean . . . ?"

"Yeah. While I was being hounded by that coffee-grinder, I looked back and saw that where the drive-shaft for the treads extends up inside to the engines there's a hole with an inch clearance. An inch is all an arrow needs to get through."

"But if you stand below in front of the machine again," said Iron Man, "he'll grind you into human hamburger."

"He won't see me," said Hawkeye mysteriously. "Just fly me a mile away and you'll see."

When Iron Man put the archer down, a mile off, Hawkeye first pulled something from his belt and attached it to his

bow.

“My telescopic sights,” he said.

Then he "withdrew a thick—shafted arrow and notched it. Carefully he squinted through his sights until the cross-hairs were on that hole he had seen which was visible from any ground-level position.

When Hawkeye let fly, Iron Man was startled to see the back end of the arrow burst forth with fire. He had never taken stock of Hawkeye’s full repertory of amazing arrows.

“My rocket arrow,” crowed. the archer, as it sped at ever-increasing speed through the ice-cold air.

Watching through his telescopic sights, Hawk-eye suddenly exclaimed: “Bull’s-eye! But then, aren’t all my shots’? There it goes up into the soft underbelly of the machine, up into the inner works, where—”

There was a muted boom from the distant machine and smoke squirted from its seams.

“I gave Karzz a hot tip,” said Hawkeye, grinning. “An arrow tip armed with superthermite that makes steel burn like paper. He’s probably yelling for the fire department right now. Let’s go watch the fun.”

No less eager than Hawkeye to see the results, iron Man hauled his companion through the air for a mile, to land near the Infrared Beamer. It now ground to a stop and started wheeling crazily in a circle. Muffled explosions sounded inside, and a hole melted in the hull from the inside out. From the hole shot a lurid red glow, as of a dozen forest fires burning fiercely.

“It looks as if my thermite arrow was like a fuse, setting off various flammables,” chortled the bowman. “And here comes the cornered rat himself out of his tinder box.”

Soot-streaked, Karzz came scuttling out of a hatchway down a ladder that suddenly burned off at the top, tumbling him the rest of the way into the snow. He stood up dazedly, staggering away from the huge pyre that his machine had now become.

But then he shrugged, facing the two men with his usual aplomb.

“You think you’ve won, eh? But before you destroyed my Infrared Beamer, I shot a boring rocket down through the ice, to come to rest a mile below. In that rocket is the heat-current radiator I told you of.”

He leered at them.

“In nine days, its temperature charge will have built up to where the entire Antarctic ice cap melts, flooding the world. It will happen the same day that the giant comet arrives from space, to deal earth another shattering blow. Two of my earth dooms have been launched, and no power on earth can stop them.”

It was true, Iron Man knew. No digging machine on earth had the capability of penetrating the massive ice sheet covering Antarctica, to reach and destroy the deadly device buried a mile down.

Karzz had won round two, after all.

“But at least you’ll die,” pronounced Iron Man, bringing up his right-hand gauntlet, “from a blast of my kill-ray.”

“Je suis sans souci,” said Karzz evenly. At Hawkeye's blank look, he translated: “I am without worry. Iron Man fails to remember that all his puny rays were stopped before by an invisible force-shield, which surrounds me now.”

“But since then,” hissed the Golden Avenger, remembering those hours in Anthony Stark’s superbly equipped lab, “I analyzed your force-shield’s likely structure and devised a way to break through. it with this Z-ray . . .”

And, as a poisonous blue ray sprang from Iron Man’s transistorized finger projector, there was a puff of smoke.

Then...nothing.

“Holy Jumping Hannah!” shrieked Hawkeye, eyes wide in disbelief. “I thought you were kidding. But you did it...you destroyed Karzz!” His elation died quickly and a haunted look came into his eyes. “Of course, we still have two earth dooms to face, but maybe a team of the world’s best scientists can prevent them. Anyway, we won’t have two other earth dooms to contend with . . .”

“Oui, you will, mon ami,” came a familiar voice.

“Karzz’?” choked Hawkeye, aghast. “But-but if he’s dead...?”

They looked up. Floating down in thin air was an image of Karzz, shimmering as if cast from a distance. The image spoke:

“All you destroyed was my android double.”

“Android double?” echoed Iron Man.

“Namely, a biological robot made of synthetic flesh-and-blood. Naturally, I could not set off three earth dooms simultaneously by myself. So I called for teleportation of my waiting android. doubles from my aides in the future.”

Hawkeye still thought it was a bad dream. “You mean that android could think, talk, and act like you?”

“Down to the last tiny item,” gloated the Karzz-image. “As for me, I’m somewhere else on earth, utterly safe. I’m projecting my long-distance image and voice electronically to you from thousands of miles away.”

“Then you’re either in the South Seas or in the Sahara,” conjectured Iron Man.

“Brilliant,” mocked Karzz. “Now that you two have failed to halt earth doom number two, may I turn my full attention to the other two dooms, *s’il vous plait?*”

“That guy burns me,” exploded Hawkeye, “with his foreign phrase-dropping! If he’d only talk straight Americanese.”

“All right,” leered the image, fading out slowly like the Cheshire Cat with a last grin. “You Avengers are called champs. Is that spelled c-h-u-m-p-s?”

Almost foaming at the mouth in fury, Hawkeye ripped an arrow from his quiver and shot straight at the image just as it blinked out.

“Wait’ll we meet next time!” he raged. “I’ll crown him *champ* chump if it’s the last thing I do.”

“Simmer down, Hawkeye,” admonished Iron Man. “Your shouts are scaring half the penguins in Antarctica. Come on, I'll fly you back to Avenger headquarters. I just hope Goliath and the Wasp have their situation well in hand in the South Seas.”

Down in the cavern on a South Seas island, at sight of Karzz and his rumbling Vulcan Machine, Goliath shot himself up to his ten-foot stature, while the Wasp swiftly shrank to insect size—their fighting forms.

As the tiny winged girl flitted near his face, Goliath rapidly whispered a plan to her. “Got it,” she murmured, darting away.

Stealthily, Goliath picked up a huge boulder among several that lay scattered about. Karzz still stood before a huge control board next to the machine, as if oblivious.

Flexing all his muscles in one mighty heave, Goliath flung the boulder at the control board.

Karzz turned smilingly. “Rather futile gesture, Tall One,” he said, touching a stud on his belt. A hissing dis-ray accurately struck the boulder in mid-flight, and all that was seen of it was vagrant smoke.

“I knew you were here all the time,” came the mocking tones of the alien. “You and your female companion were monitored the moment you entered the caves. What now, Big Oaf?”

Goliath was already rushing forward with another huge boulder, sprinting at a speed surprising for his bulk. When Karzz shot forth his dis-ray, Goliath dodged with trigger-tense agility.

Then he was upon Karzz, the boulder upraised in his hands, bringing it down with shattering force on his head.

Goliath was startled. He had expected Karzz to have his personal force-shield around him protectively, yet the boulder did not bounce away. Goliath was even more stunned to see the body of Karzz. turn transparent under the blow and then. fade from sight.

“That was amusing,” chortled a voice behind Goliath. Whirling, he saw Karzz, alive and unharmed, coming around the corner of the giant machine. “It was a little game I purposely played, planting my three-dimensional image out in the open, exposed. It quickly exposed your presence, eh, big one with the little brain?”

Goliath lunged and drove his fist at the second Karzz, but this time his blow bounced back from an invisible shell.

“Naturally, I’m protected,” gloated Karzz. “Now listen to another amusing story of how Iron Man and Hawkeye killed me down in Antarctica.”

Karzz related the details of that episode. “And so you see,” he finished, “it was only my android double they destroyed.”

Goliath squinted his eyes, looking Karzz over from head to foot. “What about you now? Are you another android—or the real thing?”

"Quien sabe?" leered Karzz. "We'll leave that as a tantalizing mystery. I enjoy feeling like the proverbial cat playing with the mouse—a gigantic mouse named Goliath."

"All right, the joke's on me," growled Goliath, exasperated. at these ingenious tricks. .

"And the punch line is that I could ray you down. on the spot," came the grim rejoinder from Karzz, his fingers straying toward his belt.

"Maybe so," admitted Goliath, fine beads of sweat on his brow. "But tell me one thing first—I'm asking out of curiosity. Did your Vulcan Machine start off that string of eruptions of long-dead volcanoes?"

Android or not, Karzz's face shone with. sudden pride. "Yes, Goliath. And I grant you reprieve until you hear the full story of earth doom number three, being launched here in this cave."

Perched nearby in a crevice in the wall, the tiny Wasp smiled to herself. It was exactly what she and Goliath had planned, getting Karzz to boast of his accomplishment. It gave him sadistic satisfaction to have his Avenger opponents know, before they died, what coup he had pulled.

"The Vulcan Machine," began Karzz, "is a generator of seismic waves. That is, it creates ground vibrations which travel down through the earth's crust to the molten magma, lying some twenty-five miles below."

Goliath nodded in understanding. As Henry Pym, scientist, he was well. acquainted with geological data about the earth's structure.

“Now, earthquakes, as you know,” resumed Karzz, almost as if he were lecturing a class, “send forth seismic waves as their calling card. The seismographs of your scientists can pick them up and pinpoint where any earthquake occurs. But what is the cause of earthquakes?”

He paused, and Goliath took the cue. “They are caused by deep-seated slips of gigantic masses of rock inside the crust, which in turn are caused by leakage of molten magma through huge cracks.”

“*Da, da,*” nodded Karzz, “earthquakes are often the prelude to volcano eruptions, allowing a stream of molten rock to work its way up through an ancient weakness in the so-called solid ground.”

He waved at his rumbling machine.

“So the Vulcan Machine simply sends down high-powered seismic waves to rupture the crust at key spots. A boiling river of molten lava rushes up from below and snakes its way to the surface, there to erupt into the air violently. I touched off the island chain of dead volcanoes. You saw the result.”

“And your aim,” guessed Goliath grimly, “is to set off more volcanoes, all around earth?”

“It’s just a matter of broadcasting the seismic triggers,” agreed Karzz. “I’m using the shotgun method, scattering the vibratory ‘fuses’ in all directions, downward, through your planet. Eventually, all the volcanoes on earth, dead or alive, will erupt without let-up—a World-Wide salvo that will devastate civilization.”

“When?” breathed Goliath, shaken at the mental picture of tens of thousands of Vesuviuses blowing their tops all over the World.

“Nine days from now,” gloated Karzz, “the giant comet my Mount Everest ultramagnet pulled down will smash into earth when the Antarctic floods of the melting ice cap reach their peak. At that time, the worldwide volcano barrage will also open up, and three earth-wrecking holocausts in combination will start to render earth *kaput*.”

Karzz turned and poised his finger near his control board. “When I press that final red push button, the seismic broadcast will speed down through the crust, setting off that geological chain reaction. The Vulcan Machine has been warming up to its full ultrasonic power. Now it is ready. . . .”

Chapter 11

Underground Duel

So was the Wasp ready. That was all she was waiting for—to know about those deadly buttons. That was what Goliath had previously whispered to her: “After I inveigle Karzz to spill the beans, keeping his attention on me, you do your stuff as the girl with the swinging stinger.”

And now, diving down from her perch like a miniature hawk, the Wasp aimed her sting-ray at -the alien’s hand, poised over his fatal push button. But what was Karzz saying...?

“Your petite lady friend thinks I’m unaware of her,” and he looked at what seemed to be a wristwatch on his other hand. “But my wrist-monitor, which magnifies microscopic objects, has been following her all the time. And now she’ll have company.”

Karzz flipped a switch. A panel opened in his control board. Out flew a bug that made a peculiar metallic buzz, which rose in an ominous crescendo.

In mid-air the Wasp came to a halt, startled at what she saw coming. "A mechanical bug," she gasped.

It was twice her size, and was made of gleaming metal, its wings operating from some tiny internal motor. In shape, it was like no one species of insect, but was a hybrid mixture of all types, with six jointed saw-edged legs. It had two huge mandibles that clanged as they opened and shut, and a long steel stinger like a knight's lance. It was a formidable machine-powered robot insect against which frail Wasp had no chance.

As the entomological Frankenstein came buzzing toward her like a ferocious praying mantis, the Wasp frantically began twisting and looping in the air, hoping to elude it.

"She will. never escape that bug bloodhound," promised Karzz, watching his miniature monitor. "It has target-seeking sensors like a guided missile, attuned to the Wasp's human heartbeat. The pounding of her pulse is all the robot bug needs to hang on her trail and duplicate every maneuver she makes."

And now- a deadly dogfight—between two pseudo-insects—took place.

No matter which way the Wasp darted, the miniature metallic monster followed relentlessly. When she tried a straightaway flight at top speed, the robot bug quickly began putting on steam and overtaking her.

An idea struck her. She flew toward the cave wall and darted into a crack in the stone. "It's too narrow for him to squeeze in," she breathed thankfully.

But outside the crack, the tiny tin. terror began extending a steel-spring “proboscis,” further and further. At its end were barbs, and Karzz’s jeering voice drifted to the Wasp’s ears as he watched all this on his wrist-monitor:

“Those barbs are poisoned, *ma cheri*, One touch and you shrivel into a miniature mummy.”

Wasp was forced to slip aside before the barbed nemesis could reach her, then work her way out of the crack. But now she was in the open again, at the mercy of the pursuing robot insect. Was there no escape for her?

“Coward!” said Karzz mockingly to Goliath, who stood helplessly. “Why don’t you aid your girl friend? Surely a great giant like you could defeat a mere mechanical bug.”

But of course, that’s just what Goliath couldn’t.. do—not as Goliath. As Karzz gloatingly glued his eyes on his wrist-monitor screen, he did not notice Goliath shrinking rapidly, and vanishing.

A moment later, the Ant-Man sprang into action, scuttling across the floor to the Vulcan Machine and swiftly climbing it, with many handholds available to him in his tiny size. When he was perched somewhere near the top, on a huge pipe, he cupped his lips and called: “Wasp! It’s me, the Ant-Man. Lead that tin bug over this way.”

Hearing the shrill shout, Wasp swung up toward the pipe, the mechanical bug pursuing as he was programmed to do. Ant-Man’s shout was no warning to its one-track tape-operated computer mind.

So it was that Ant-Man was able to time a long desperate leap—and land squarely on the robot bug’s back. The force

of the impact drove the artificial creature down to the floor with a metallic clank.

“Hide, Wasp!” the Ant-Man shouted. “Don’t fly. He’s only programmed to follow your flying form. If he sees nothing like that, he will stay here and slug it out with me, whether he likes it or not.”

And with that, Ant-Man unwound a terrific blow.

“Right at your chin, if any,” he barked.

But the blow that had stunned a tiger beetle, and might have knocked other bugs cold, had no more effect on the heavy metallic bug than a love pat would.

Meanwhile Karzz started, and stared closely at his wrist-monitor. “So, Goliath assumed a tiny form to tackle my robot Wasp-killer, eh? Well, a twist of the remote controls, here beside the monitor, and he’ll turn into an invincible Ant-Man killer.”

The robot bug, indifferent to Ant-Man before, now turned toward him, its heady eye-sensors focusing on its new prey, according to the instructions impulsed from its alien master.

With a prodigious leap, it pounced on the Ant-Man before he could scramble back. It’s saw-edged legs raked across Ant-Man’s back painfully, and two vise-like mandibles clamped shut, barely missing biting off his arm.

Then Ant-Man wrenched free and swung around, crouching, and wondering what next to expect from his formidable foe. He did not have long to wait. The robot bug buzzed into the air and came down, stinger first, ready to impale Ant-Man through and through.

With trigger-touch reflexes inherent to his size, Ant-Man sprang back. But now, as he tried to run for hiding, the buzzing mechanical creature darted down time after time with its stinger.

“And if you try changing back to your Goliath size,” Warned Karzz, “I’ll sic -the killer--bug back -on the Wasp.” He hardly needed to add that it the Wasp took on human size, Karzz could instantly seize the helpless girl.

It was a deadly trap, no matter how Ant-Man looked at it. He kept running from the flying robot bug and its steel stinger. before Ant-Man stretched the barren floor that to him was a mile long. Panting, he found it harder each time to avoid that aerial rapier, for his muscles were tiring.

Watching his wrist-monitor, like some Roman emperor at the arena while gladiators fought to -the death, Karzz used his fingernail to touch. a small switch that sent a new command to the robot bug.

“*The coup de gr^âce,*” spoke Karzz aloud. “Here it comes, Ant-Man. Don’t forget my mechanical flyer is really an attack plane in miniaturized bug-like form, so...”

And now, to Ant-Man's horror, a flap opened in the side of the flying robot and a snout poked out. A miniature machine gun began spraying tiny bullets at Ant-Man, kicking up dust at his heels.

But Ant-Man’s hair, sensitive to subtle vibrations and forces, like an insect’s antennae—an attribute that automatically came with his bug size—detected something

nearby. He swung that way, toward a bluish stone lying on the cave floor.

The bullet-spewing bug now slowed down to set its sights carefully for the killing salvo. But suddenly, the robot was yanked through the air by another force, and was tumbling out of control.

Karzz stared at his -tiny monitor “*Caramba!* What happened? Why doesn’t it respond to my controls?”

“Because,” shouted the tiny Ant-Man, watching the killer-bug sailing at mounting speed, “that blue stone I ran toward is a lodestone, a natural magnet. And your mechanical bug, of course, has a steel body.”

Drawn inexorably to the lodestone, the robot bug crashed into it at high speed and burst apart into wires, wheels, and metallic debris.

Muttering what must have been imprecations in his native tongue, the alien poised his fingernail over a red button on the wrist-monitor. “There’s still one thing I can do...I can press the destruction button. Though the robot bug has already burst apart, within its head is a charge of radioisotopic explosive, enough. to blow you to eternity, Ant-Man.”

“No . . . no!” cried the Wasp. But she was waiting for this—if Karzz made the wrong move. Like a tiny dive-bomber, she zoomed down at his hand, aiming her sting beam.

She jabbed deep into flesh . . . but nothing. happened.

Momentarily diverted, Karzz saw the buzzing Wasp and grinned ghoulishly. “Why didn’t I yell in pain, my dear? Can

you guess?”

“You’re an android,” gasped the girl, in realization. She couldn’t sting this insensitive carbon copy of Karzz and produce pain. But there was something else she could do....

The Wasp’s next dive aimed her sting-beam at the android’s wrist-monitor. All the drilling power struck home, shattering the screen to bits and scattering microminiature components underneath.

“My robot bug’s remote controls—Wrecked!” cried Karzz.

“Right,” sang back the Wasp. “You can’t set off the destruction button. now. Ant-Man is safe.”

Karzz the android—himself guided by remote controls and a monitor into which the real Karzz was staring, elsewhere on earth—seized an ordinary fly-swatter from a hook on the wall. “I’ll swat you myself. . . .”

Swinging the swatter, Karzz suddenly turned and stopped abruptly, seeing the giant man towering before him. “Ant-Man...back in Goliath form!”

“Yes, and my anger is as big as I am.” Suddenly his arms went around Karzz, force-field and all. “After all,” rumbled Goliath, “even with that invisible shield, it’s only ten feet around.”

Yanking the Karzz android and his energy bubble off the floor, Goliath hurled them straight at the Vulcan Machine with titanic force, aiming for electronic devices within. its heart.

A gigantic spark leaped forth, piercing the energy bubble and electrocuting the android into a blackened mass, It could hardly be called a corpse, since it had never been truly alive.

“Get out of the cave, Wasp!” roared Goliath now. As she ran into a side passage through which they had entered before, Goliath strode to Where two limestone columns in the middle of the big cavern extended from floor to roof.

By some freak of geological processes, through eons of time, two giant stalagmites from the floor and two stalactites from the ceiling had met and merged.

Crooking an elbow around each of these natural. pillars, Goliath strained mightily, knotting every muscle in his massive body. Stone creaked and groaned.

Suddenly, like a cannon-shot, both limestone pillars snapped. A ceiling weakened by ages of seeping waters now began to collapse, as Goliath had surmised would happen.

With a resounding roar louder than a hundred thunder-claps, the entire cavern collapsed. inward. Untold tons of rock crashed down on the Vulcan Machine, flattening it into a hissing, smoking ruin. Nothing man-made, or alien-made, could withstand that crushing force. Nor anything alive....

“Wasp,” Karzz spoke calmly at his unknown retreat far away, tuning his monitor screen to her. “Goliath didn’t accomplish anything. When the robot bug chased you away from my control board, I immediately pressed the final push button, sending the ultrasonic broadcast of trigger Waves down into the world’s crust. Such sonic vibrations, as you know, follow rock strata everywhere. Thus, the destruction of my Vulcan Machine now was a futile gesture.”

Karzz's voice rang triumphantly. "In nine days, along with earth dooms one and two, volcanic catastrophe number three will also happen, right on schedule."

His frosty eyes stared straight at the Wasp now, and there was a curl on his lips. "But I think the end of the World, for you, has already happened—Goliath, of course, could never come out of the wrecked cavern alive."

"You're right," murmured the Wasp. "Absolutely right, Karzz."

She smiled and lifted up her palm, on which stood a tiny form. "But the Ant-Man could! No matter how many broken stones tell and piled up, there was plenty of space between then for an insect-sized man to huddle in safety, and then crawl out to freedom."

Karzz cursed, eloquently, as he watched the Ant-Man shoot up and assume his human form, alongside the Wasp. "But I'm glad," he said then, with a malicious grin. "It means that you will be around to die with the rest of the human race, nine days from now, when the world comes to an end. Now . . . aloha."

His floating image faded away, as a last harsh laugh rippled mockingly through the air.

"That's true," whispered the Wasp. "We won against the Karzz android, but lost to Karzz himself."

"Well, at least one thing we know," muttered Henry Pym, "is that the real Karzz, who was neither at Antarctica, nor here in the South Seas, must be in the Sahara. Here's

hoping Captain America can settle that inhuman monster's hash there."

"Let's get back to Avenger headquarters fast," said the Wasp, "and rejoin Iron Man and Hawkeye there. They must be on the way back. Then we can all go to Cap's aid in the Sahara. It looks as if the big showdown will be there."

Chapter 12

Desert Danger

For many wasted hours, Captain America had been searching the vast Sahara desert.

“Three and a half million square miles,” rode the nagging thought with him; “or almost as big as the United States. It’s like searching from the East Coast. to the West Coast, and from Minnesota down to Texas, for the Storm Satellite Launcher of Karzz.”

First he had made wide sweeps over the great desert in the rocketplane, peering down. But when fuel. ran dangerously low, he had landed at a central spot, and then broke out the emergency jeep inside the plane. It’s six wheeled drive easily negotiating even loose sand, he had made overland forays in all directions, until even the jeep’s nuclear power unit—another Anthony Stark invention—ran low.

Finally, he had unpacked the radar gear stowed in the rocketplane to slowly scan outward in a radius of 500 miles--again by virtue of a Stark invention using radar waves that “bent” around the earth’s curvature.

Cap heard a clicking from the parked jeep. His two-way world-wide radio phone was ringing. Cap picked it up and heard Henry Pym's voice from a transoceanic liner. "Wasp and I are heading back. for Avenger headquarters." He gave a quick resume of their skirmish against Karzz and the Vulcan Machine.

"Hmm. So it was another android double of Karzz in the South Seas, as well as in Antarctica."

"Right, Cap. That means you'll run into the genuine Karzz, After We reach headquarters and rejoin Iron Man and Hawkeye, we'll all four of us rush to the Sahara."

"Okay," responded Cap. "But meanwhile, I'll be searching for him myself. Over and out."

Cap's thoughts were not pleasant as he returned to his radar scan-of the Sahara. Three incredible future machines had triggered. off three ghastly earth dooms. Even if Cap did succeed in halting doom number four, earth was hardly saved. Warning the authorities was hopeless. Who could stop the giant comet plunging through space toward earth? Or the mile-deep heat device that would melt the colossal Antarctic ice cap and flood the world? Or the world-wide fusillade of volcanoes that would erupt, started off by the Vulcan Machine?

"But I still Want to get my hands on that world-wrecker," Cap grated -through his teeth. "He won't escape to the future and finish his conquest of space. He'll stay here to share the end of the world with us...so help me!"

With that vow burning through his veins, the star-spangled champion turned back to his radar screen, which now showed the outlines of an old abandoned fort,

completely deserted, within a straggling oasis of drooping palms. Even the well had dried up, and the place was shunned by desert travelers. All this Cap knew from the comprehensive Sahara guidebook he had foresightedly taken along.

But where were Karzz and his rocket? Out in the hot open desert itself, where the sun's blazing glare made radar images faint and undeterminable?

Suddenly, remembering an odd thing, Cap swung the screen back to old Fort Shahib. How could that one slender tower he had seen shine like bright metal? All the rest of the fort was stone grey with age.

Peering closely and tuning the image sharper, Cap sucked in his breath. That was no tower; it was the huge nose of a rocket sticking up within the high outer wall of the fort.

He tossed away the dehydrated K-rations he had been eating, which had been reduced to compact lozenge size by Anthony Stark's science magic. Slinging his survival kit over one shoulder, his shield over the other, he jumped in the jeep and spun off across the wasteland.

With smooth sand before him like the natural race-tracks of Daytona Beach or the Utah Flats, Cap was able to shift his nuclear jeep into its top speed of 100 miles an hour for the three-hour trip to Fort Shahib, some 300 miles south.

It was the south-central Sahara, the most desolate area, spotted with just a few widely scattered Bedouin camps and crossed by only one long-unused camel trail of the old Arabian nomads. It was doubtful if anyone from the outside world had been here in fifty years.

Endless burning sand, rippling in the wind, stretched before Cap's squinting, sun-dazzled eyes. He fumbled beside him and slapped a pith-helmet on his head; otherwise he'd go glare-blind in an hour.

Heat rose in invisible, suffocating waves from the shiny sands. Cap kept telling himself the temperature was only 120 degrees. He did not dare look at the windshield thermometer. If he found it registered 150 degrees, the shock might undermine his grim determination to endure the hell-hot inferno he was crossing.

He drank sparingly from his water supply, but when he picked up the canteen again and upended it, it was empty, dry. Hurling it down, he licked his leathery lips and drove on for what was another eternity, though his lying watch said only two hours had passed.

The noonday sun pitilessly poured its furnace heat down on him. Cap suddenly jerked up and swung the jeep around.

"A Nazi machine-gun nest!" he exclaimed. "What's it doing here today, long after the war? They're opening fire. . . ."

As at the Avenger memorial ceremonies, Cap leaped out of the jeep, shield forward, and charged. Sand flew under his feet as he warded off the hail of bullets and hurled himself headlong, his fist cracking on...nothing.

He sat up, spitting the sand out of his mouth, dazed.

"A mirage? Delusion? Take hold of yourself, boy. You're cracking up."

He drove on, but images again swam before he eyes...and faded. Once he glanced beside him in happy astonishment to see Bucky sitting there. But that image, too, faded....

"I'm an Avenger," he ground out between clenched teeth. "An Avenger does not crack up, hear me? if I flip my lid now, I'll let down my Avenger pals...and the whole world...and twenty thousand future worlds.... Hang on...*hang on!*

He was singing "*twenty thousand future worlds, baked in a pie.... What will Karzz do with them? My, my, my!*" when the ramparts of the tort rose over the horizon before him. His maniacal laughter choked off.

"Karzz's hangout," he muttered, and once again he was Captain America, Avenger, alert for danger and tuned for action.

Cannily, he drove up behind the screening palms of the oasis, cutting off a direct view from the fort, hoping to surprise Karzz. He belly-crawled through, the sand, brushing aside lizards and other creatures of the desert. Soundlessly, he wriggled among stone debris where one portion of the old fort's wall had collapsed.

Skilled in the tactics of unseen and unheard approach, Cap congratulated himself that he could have surprised a platoon of Nazis in the fort if they had been there, as he raced silently through the front gates.

"*Bon soir*, Captain America! Why did you go to all that trouble sneaking in?" a mocking voice greeted him. It was Karzz, pointing at a monitor screen atop an electronic box.

“You have been under surveillance ever since your vehicle first approached the old fort.”

Cap conquered his first surge of disappointment. Swiftly his eyes took in the wide courtyard and the tall rocket standing on end with a gantry tower around it. Turning back to Karzz, Cap’s eyes narrowed. Was the faint purplish aura of his force-shield missing for some reason? Was he vulnerable?

Suddenly he plunged forward in a crouch, to find out.

Karzz stood unperturbed. “You are the incomparable man-to-man, face-to-face, toe-to-toe slugger that no other man on earth is a match for...except *one*,” he said.

He touched a stud on his belt and a figure dashed out of a barracks doorway nearby.

Cap’s driving plunge had ground to a halt, in utter shock. The man coming toward him in a crouch, legs churning powerfully, had a round shield in front ...a uniform of red, white, and blue design . . . a winged cap...

“It’s me!” choked Cap. “Another Captain America!”

“Your android double. While you were supposedly sneaking in, my electro-scan ray was X-raying you inside and out, feeding the data into a bio-computer, which then built up a carbon copy of you, so to speak. His body and mind are exactly like yours. So, in a sense, my body-guard is...Captain America!”

Karzz finished with a devilish laugh. “Now see if you can defeat yourself.”

Recovering from his first shock, Cap sprang forward to meet his twin's charge. Like super football-players, two powerful figures came together with bruising. impact, their shields clanging together so loudly that the vibrations made a dozen loose bricks fall out of the crumbling wall nearby.

They both reeled back. It was almost like a parody in pantomime, the two actors doing everything the same, and reacting exactly alike.

In unison, they swung the world's mightiest fists at each other, to meet the world's toughest chins. When Cap suddenly flung his shield to slice at his opponent's legs, the second Captain America also sailed his shield in a perfect block shot, knocking Cap's shield aside.

When Cap ran to retrieve it, his double leaped head-long to tackle him around the legs and they both crashed to the ground. Both without shields, they wrestled and tumbled. in the dirt. When Cap pulled a judo trick to hurl the android back, his double promptly rolled on his back and footed Cap away as he charged.

Karzz had watched the furious battle with an amused grin. "Very entertaining, but I have work to do. While you're busy fighting with yourself, Captain America, I'll start the countdown for my Storm Satellite."

The alien flipped over switches on a control board near the rocket then began counting: "Ten...nine...eight..."

It was now or never for Cap, if he hoped to stop earth doom number four—whatever it was—from being launched.

He tried a desperate ruse, facing his android double and gripping his shield as if to sling it at him again.

“Seven...six...five ...”

Cap flung the shield, but not at the android. It went to the side, at one of the stone walls of the courtyard.

Puzzled at this move, the android hesitated a moment, watching the flying shield. It was at this instant that Cap hurled himself forward, taking the android unawares and flattening him with a driving shoulder in his solar plexus. He heard synthetic bones crack within the artificial man.

“Three...two...one...”

Cap went over the fallen android, straight toward Karzz at his controls, with a flying leap.

“Ignition!” Cap heard, just before he smashed into the control box and tipped it over with a crash, staggering Karzz back.

Chapter 13

***Avengers'* Darkest Hour**

Cap fell back as a roar burst from the rear of the rocket and a glowing flame drove it upward out of its launch cradle.

“Too late!” crowed Karzz. “My rocket is on its way to space orbit above earth.”

Cap clutched at him desperately but once again met the diamond-hard invisible shield of force that had previously protected the alien.

“I had to convert all. my available power into the launching procedure before,” Karzz said. “But now I can keep my shield around me again.” He shrugged. “It hardly matters that you disposed of my android bodyguard. You may as well share my joy now that earth doom number four is launched on schedule, and hear all about it. I want you Avengers to know my achievements in full so that you will more exquisitely enjoy zero-day—when your world ends.”

“Never mind rubbing it in,” growled Cap. “Let me hear the facts.”

Karzz chuckled, and went on. "My aides in the seventieth century devised and teletransported this launch rocket to me in the twentieth century. Its payload is about to go into orbit."

Karzz pointed to a monitor screen, in which the powerful rocket could be seen driving upward and starting to slant toward the horizontal. The booster separated and the second stage drummed on, faster and higher. Then the empty second stage separated, and floating in space was a shiny shell whose outer sheath split open to reveal an intricate satellite.

"The Storm Satellite," said Karzz. "As it spins around earth every ninety minutes, it will spray down kinetic forces into the top layers of the atmosphere. A violent wind will gradually arise in the thin' stratosphere and work its way down into the thicker air near earth."

"You mean all the air around earth will turn windy?"

"Yes, in eight days. The satellite went into polar orbit, which means it will shift westward every revolution, and thus will cover every area of the upper air daily. It will eventually whip up a superhurricane all over earth, with Wind velocities of five hundred miles an hour."

Cap gasped. "Most natural hurricanes are under one hundred miles an hour."

"You can picture, then," Karzz gloated, "what my super-wind will do, blowing away people, cars, houses, everything. It will have the force to level the sturdiest steel skyscrapers, which will crash in big cities and create a further shambles. After a few hours, earth's surface will be swept bare."

Cap shuddered at the stark picture of wind-swept destruction.

"Of course," said Karzz, "there won't be much left to be swept away after the giant comet crashes, and the Antarctic floods arise, and earth's volcanoes erupt in unison. Do you think, Captain America, that even one person will be left alive on earth after the four dooms strike?"

Cap choked, unable to answer. .

"There won't be," Karzz predicted savagely. "And that means my goal will be accomplished, eight days from now. With earthly civilization wiped out, there will be no human race to 'build up a superior technology that would in the seventieth century smash my drive for galactic conquest. In short, the new parallel universe, or if universe, will replace the former real universe. And in the parallel universe, I will win the galaxy."

Cap felt hollow inside. Had this heartless monster won all? What were his plan's now? "With your four earth dooms launched, are you going to return to the future?"

"Not yet," Karzz answered. "I will remain on twentieth-century earth for three more days, to observe and make sure the four dooms are properly building up to their climaxes. If one or more of them seems to be halting, I will make the proper adjustments to insure their final success. Then I will say farewell to earth...forever."

The alien's frosty eyes glared at Captain America triumphantly. "Rest assured that no hitch in my world-wrecking plans will occur. In eight days...*sic transit gloria mundi!*"

“And so passes away the glory of the world,” muttered Cap, remembering the translation from the Latin from his college days. Rage boiled up in him now, at the smug, ruthless monster from outer space...and outer time. Leaping up, Cap slammed away at Karzz with all his power—or at the force-shell protecting him. It was futile, senseless, Cap knew. Yet he could not stop himself from hammering away, until his knuckles cracked and bled.

Karzz was laughing harshly

“Keep it up, asinine Avenger. You will never burst through my energy shell.” .

Yet suddenly, there was no invisible obstruction there, and Cap’s fist connected solidly with the alien’s chin, sending him head-over-heels.

Cap stood stunned, hardly believing it had happened. Then he leaped forward and ripped the studded belt off of Karzz, who was just dazedly picking himself out of the dirt. “Without this belt of weapon rays or your force-shield, you’re my prisoner.”

“But how can my force-shield be gone?” said the bewildered Karzz.

“Because,” rang out a new voice, “I penetrated it with my Z-ray, as I did once before in Antarctica.”

Cap whirled. “Iron Man!”

“Hi, Cap,” said Iron Man, landing with Hawkeye, whom he was towing. “We came as soon as we could, all four of us.”

“Four? But where are Goliath and Wasp?”

“Ant-Man, alias Goliath, and the Wasp rode in style,” answered Iron Man with a grin, opening a pouch in his belt. Two tiny figures crept into his palm and he lowered them to the ground. The next moment, two human figures grew magically before their eyes until they were normal size.

“That pouch was rather stuffy,” complained Goliath.

“And full of lint,” added the Wasp, brushing herself off.

“You’re all a sight for sore eyes,” said Cap happily.

But then. his face fell. “But you came too late to stop earth doom number four.”

Briefly, he recounted the story of what the Storm Satellite would do.

“Maybe we’re too late to stop that,” said Iron Man, seizing the still-dazed Karzz, “but not too late to blackmail this fugitive from the future.”

“Blackmail?” echoed Cap.

“First of all,” explained Iron Man, “remember that we met only androids of Karzz in Antarctica and the South Seas. But this is the real Karzz now, handling the Storm Satellite’s launch in person.”

Iron Man shook Karzz like a rat.

“And now here’s the pitch, mister. It won’t do you much good to be here for the end of the world, will it? If you die too, in the holocaust you. caused, you can hardly return to

the seventieth century, and carry out your conquest of space.”

Karzz paled, and Iron Man went on measuring his words grimly.

“That’s the blackmail, pal. We’re offering you a trade. Your life for the lives of three billion doomed earth people. I’m assuming that with your future science you can somehow reverse or halt the earth-doom processes.... Well?”

“But what if I can’t?” choked Karzz, his face distorted with fright.

“Then you still stick with us, as our prisoner, for eight days. You’ll have a grandstand seat for the big show, as earth. cracks up around your ears as well as ours.”

Karzz's face had turned to putty. Terror shone from his eyes. “I—I don’t know if the tour dooms can be halted,” he stammered. “I never thought of it.”

“Well, you’d better begin. thinking now,” spoke up Hawkeye. “And if you fail...” Whipping an arrow out of his quiver, he shot it at whistling speed past Karzz’s ear. “You’re going to die a thousand deaths in the next few days, before the real thing comes. I’ll use you for target practice every day, see?”

Goliath was shooting up to his full ten-foot size, and he now seized up the -trembling alien in his. two mighty paws. “That is, Hawkeye will have you only in between the times I toss you around like this....”

Goliath flung the screeching alien up in the air, like a mere toy. He sailed up and up to dizzy heights before he plummeted. down into Goliath's waiting arms with a thud that knocked his breath out.

The Wasp, in her tiny size, next came diving down to jab her sting-beam into Karzz's shoulder. "When the boys get tired entertaining you, I'll take over," she promised grimly.

"And I," added Iron Man, "would like to put you in an armored suit, like a knight, and have some daily exercise with battle-axes."

"I think," advised Cap mildly, "you had better listen to them, Karzz. Even though I'm the leader of the Avengers, I don't think I could hold them back. Besides, I might just happen. to have my back turned."

He grabbed Karzz by the neck and shook a mighty bailed fist in his .face. "And in case they sluff off, I'll use you as a punching bag every hour on the hour. Give, you worm . . . can you save earth?"

But Karzz was laughing now, wildly. Cap let him go, surprised.

"Did he lose his buttons?" asked Hawkeye.

But Karzz did a more astounding thing, seizing an arrow out of Hawkeye's quiver and plunging it into his chest clear through his body.

"He's bumped himself off," groaned Goliath, as Karzz fell to the ground.

"Pretty good play-acting. *Si, señors?*"

All the Avengers jerked at this new voice out of thin air—the voice of multi-lingual Karzz.

Then they saw the image of the alien's leering face floating toward them.

"Good grief!" whispered Iron Man, toeing the fallen body pierced by the arrow. "Then this was an android too."

"*Buenos noches* from the real Karzz," said the mocking image. "What squares you Avengers are! Under my control, my guided android pretended fear and helplessness just to carry out -the farce to its end. I have made utter fools of five great champions of earth."

They all looked the way they felt...miserable. Victory had been snatched out of their hands.

"Let me explain," went on Karzz. "I sent out my three androids from the start, to Antarctica, the South Seas, and the Sahara. I myself have been safely hidden in a secret haven all the time. Where? You'll never guess. I still must stay three days to make sure the four earth dooms are coming on schedule. Well, Avengers? An American phrase is most apt at this point: *Cat got your tongue?*"

None of them had anything to say.

"Farewell," said the image, receding and fading away. "You'll never find me in my hidden haven." A last mocking laugh...then silence.

There was an awkward silence among the five Avengers too. At last, Hawkeye spoke up lamely: "If mankind is doomed, simple—we resign from the human race."

Nobody laughed or even cracked a smile. Hawkeye dramatically drew out an arrow and pretended to stab himself, as the android had.

“Three days to search the whole world. for Karzz, without a clue,” said Cap, voicing the thoughts of all of them. “We haven’t got a ghost of a chance. Where would we look first?”

“In the sea,” said Iron Man calmly, looking at an instrument he had slipped out of his belt. “That’s where his image-broadcast came from. You see, after that episode Hawkeye and I had in Antarctica, first meeting that image-gimmick, I returned to my lab and worked on the problem before coming here, figuring Karzz would use the trick again.”

He tapped the transistorized instrument. “I devised an image-tracer covering every known kind of carrier wave in the spectrum—gamma rays, X-rays, Ultraviolet, optical, infrared, radar, and radio waves. I also hooked in the range of cosmic radiation and the area Where electrons, neutrons, protons, and mesons operate as wave particles. I left nothing to chance.”

He looked at his wristwatch. “I’m waiting for the 'built-in thumbnail computer to analyze all the data and pin down the exact spot undersea where Karzz is hiding.”

“Superscience against superscience,” murmured Cap. “That will be the only Way to win out over Karzz. Without you and the scientific genius you bring from Anthony Stark, Iron Man...Well, we Avengers would have nothing to avenge.”

“Ah, here are the results.” Iron Man peered at a thin tape that came out of the side of the tracer device, imprinted with mathematical data.

“Hmm . . . According to latitude and longitude figures, Karzz is in some sunken hideout in the deepest part of earth’s oceans—down in the Pacific Trench between Hawaii and Japan, seven and a half miles deep.”

“But how do We get there, and what do we do?” Hawkeye asked.

“That,” said Captain America, drawing himself up, “is something to be worked out at an Avenger conference among all of us, back at headquarters. Let’s go....”

Chapter 14

Destination Deep-Sea

“Ah, nothing like a good night’s sleep,” said Hawkeye, coming into the conference room at Avenger headquarters to find the Wasp already there. “Not to mention a hot bath, a change of uniform, and a seven-course dinner. I feel great.

“Like a *novus homo*?” said the Wasp. “That’s French. for ‘new man,’ old. thing.”

“Look, *Fraulein*, don’t give me any of that linguistic guff the way Karzz does,” growled Hawkeye. Then he Went on musingly. “I wonder if people think we Avengers never bother with life’s trivialities—sleep, showers, meals, trimming our fingernails, and such. I’ll bet they think I Wear my Hawkeye uniform day in and day out, without a change.”

“Don’t you?” queried the Wasp in wide-eyed innocence.

“Very funny. It so happens I have three full uniforms. two of them always out at the cleaners.”

He eyed the Wasp with a devilish glint in his eye. “Your elastic uniform has stretched from small to large so many times that your leotards have baggy knees.”

“Why, that’s pretty funny,” laughed the Wasp.

“Yeah?” said Hawkeye, startled and pleased.

“Yes, but it only proves,” said the girl sweetly, “that you’re a Hawkeye *android*. The real Hawkeye serves nothing but stale corn with mold on it.”

Hawkeye smote his forehead dramatically. “Why do I always play stooge for you?” he said plaintively.

They were bantering as usual, but only to cower up the gnawing dread within. Multiple earth dooms launched by Karzz the Conqueror...to crush this thought they had to play a game of brittle humor.

“Speaking of stretch uniforms,” put in Goliath, “shed a sympathetic tear for Wasp and me. Our special super-elastic costumes have to stretch and shrink from insect proportions up to human size—and to ten-foot tallness in my case—along with our bodies. They Wear out in a month and it costs us plenty to replace them constantly.”

“And what about my arrows?” retorted Hawkeye, not to be outdone at hardships. “Each is made of special parts and tricky gizmos that I have to sweat over through long hours.”

“If we think we have it tough,” put in Goliath, pointing down the hall at a golden figure approaching, “what about Iron Man? That is, the man inside, whoever he is. All he ever told us is that he’s condemned. to live in that steel suit almost twenty-four hours a day. Otherwise, for some unknown reason, he would die.”

“That means if his iron tux ever cracked open when he goes into battle with us...” Hawkeye threw up his hands. “I Withdraw from the poor-me contest. Next to him, who’s got troubles?”

“Cap has,” murmured. the Wasp, as their star-spangled leader strode in. “With his memories of a vanished past, and of 'Bucky. Plus the king-sized responsibility of working out the right Avenger moves. Just think, if the world comes to an end—assuming no miscalculation by Karzz—Cap will blame himself for some kind of ‘mistake’ he called for in Avenger tactics.”

The three of them shuddered a bit.

Despite this inner burden, Cap called out in his usual firm voice: “Avengers, assemble!” They sat around the table.

He read from a news bulletin. “Scientists report several alarming and unexplained’ phenomena occurring around the earth. The Antarctic ice cap has begun melting mysteriously. Volcano eruptions have started in the South Pacific and are spreading through "thousands of islands. The Tiros and Nimbus satellites of NASA have recorded violent wind currents unaccountably arising in the high stratosphere, plus the sudden appearance of a new satellite, assumed to be Russian, but this is denied by them.

Even more baffling is the giant comet plunging into the solar system. from outer space with a trajectory that may come alarmingly close to earth, though full computer data is not yet in.”

Cap eyed the others around the table.

“If we secretly hoped that Karzz was bluffing or was self-deluded, We know otherwise now. Unless by some miracle

he has miscalculated the final results, earth will meet oblivion in just one week. The question is, do we inform the authorities of the machinations of Karzz, which so far we Avengers alone know about? Opinions, please?"

Iron Man shook his head slowly. "It would leak out to the public and create needless panic."

"No emergency measures can be taken to save people from any of the dooms," spoke up Goliath, "even if they were forewarned."

"Only a mass migration into space would save humanity," added the Wasp. "And we don't have the spacecraft to send even a dozen survivors away."

"Besides," drawled Hawkeye, "Who could do anything against Karzz if We Avengers can't?"

Cap tapped his gavel perfunctorily. "It is unanimously agreed to go ahead on our own without a word to the world."

Cap's next remark startled all of them, except the Golden Avenger. "Iron Man informs me that he and Stark had secretly designed a manned spacecraft capable of moon-flight, in case the US. fell too far behind in the moon race. A few days of tuning up and it could take us from earth before the end. You will vote yea or no."

"Negative," shot back a quick chorus from Goliath and the Wasp.

At the same time Hawkeye sprang to his feet, his face livid. "Cap, that was an insult. Do you think any of us would be white-livered, spineless, cowardly worms and save our

own miserable hides'?" He caught his breath. "Wait...how do you and Iron Man vote?"

"Relax, Boy Scout," said Cap. "In private, Iron Man and I had already cast negatives in advance. So that's out of the way."

His face became more serious. "Next is the matter of invading -the undersea lair of Karzz. Anthony Stark, of course, previously assigned to us a suitable diving craft, among the many vehicles he has invented. for our special missions-," He looked around slowly. "Now, if Karzz is on guard against us, he can probably spot our approaching craft like a sitting duck. On the other hand, he may be so confident we couldn't locate him that he won't expect us. We'll have to run that risk."

They all nodded grimly.

"Iron Man will take along his Z-ray," resumed Cap, "to penetrate the personal. force-field Karzz might be shielded by. We stand a good chance to capture him-for real this time."

They flushed at the thought of the episode in the Sahara, when they captured the android.

"Then we can make a deal with him," finished Cap.

"His life for saving the World—if he can. If he can't, that's his tough luck."

Cap smiled crookedly. "That would shift destiny into a third kind of parallel universe, one in which Karzz, dying in the twentieth century, never exists in the seventieth

century at all. Thus we would have saved twenty thousand other future Worlds, if not our own.”

“Yet nobody would ever know,” mused Iron Man softly.

“All earth records would be destroyed.”

“Right, Iron Man. Uh...I almost said Ironic Man,” quipped Hawkeye. “But the thought-is plenty strangeville. The joke would really be on Karzz, caught in his own time trap.”

“Some joke,” growled Goliath, “with the human race wiped out along with him. I say let’s get going against that world-wrecking wretch from the future.”

“Seconded,” snapped Hawkeye.

“Thirded,” said the Wasp. .

“Carried,” barked Cap, rising. “We leave at 1200 hours—five minutes from now—and fly by rocketplane to the coast. Iron Man has already wired ahead for our deep-sea boat to be ready.”

Five minutes later a countdown sent the Avenger rocketplane roaring into the sky. An hour later, at the Pacific coast, they made another countdown at sea and took off—straight down.

Looking like some queer denizen of the deep, their special bathysphere plunged rapidly, passing through the “milk” zone of fading sunlight at 3000 feet, then dropping down into the lightless pit of stygian darkness that extended another six miles down.

On top the hull, a swinging atomic searchlight stabbed through the inky waters, lighting up unearthly species of deep-sea fish that inhabited this sunless realm. As with the “Trieste’s” pioneering dive years before, they saw life forms incredibly existing at every depth.

“Spooky,” said the Wasp with a shiver, looking out. “Like another world.”

“The pressure down here is about five tons per square inch,” estimated Goliath with his Dr. Pym mind.

“Almost enough to crush your thick skull,” commented Hawkeye.

“You’ve got the bends,” sniffed the Wasp, “in your brains.”

“Aw, you and Goliath are ganging up on me with the quips,” complained Hawkeye. “It’s hardly fair—for you two.”

“Approaching sea-bottom zero,” sang out Iron Man tensely, at the controls. “We’re coming down over the spot where Karzz’s lair should be. I’m turning out all lights, outer and inner.”

A click, and oppressing darkness struck them like a blow.

“Eyes peeled below, everyone,” ordered Captain America. A faint fluorescent glow indicated the outline of the observation window in the floor, allowing them to grope their way to its edge and peer down.

“Eek!” cried the Wasp suddenly. “A glowing tentacle of giant size.”

And at that moment, as something huge wrapped itself around their craft with the squish of suction cups against the hull, they were thrown off their feet.

“A giant kraken!” shouted Cap. “The deep-sea squid with tentacles a hundred feet long, like a creature in one of Jules Verne’s stories.”

Iron Man had clung to his seat at the controls. Now he yanked over a lever. Lightning flashes sizzled through the water outside. Almost instantly, the tentacle’s grip unwound. from the craft, and something thrashed wildly in the water and departed, leaving a wake of faintly phosphorescent bubbles.

“I jolted him with five megavolts,” said. Iron Man dryly. “Mr. Squeezer decided he had an appointment elsewhere.” His voice sobered. “I only hope that electrical display didn’t warn Karzz of our coining.”

Iron Man inched the craft down now, as they all resumed the downward watch. A faint glow below gradually brightened and grew bigger, until it resolved itself into a huge lighted structure.

“A lighted and aerated dome,” breathed Cap. “Karzz’s sea-bottom hideout seventy thousand fathoms deep. How did he conjure it down here? Talk about superscience...”

His voice trailed away in awed amazement.

“Does Karzz,” wondered Iron Man more practically, “have any detection or alarm system for approaching craft?”

The answer came suddenly with sizzling rays spangling from the dome's apex, stabbing through the water toward their craft.

"Hard aport," called out Iron Man. "Hang on, everybody."

They barely had time to grab hand—hold bars on the walls before the diving ship slammed sideways, swift as a leaping greyhound. Iron Man twisted and turned in the waters, but the rays followed relentlessly.

Suddenly, the craft dived straight down.

"I'm aiming for a sea-bottom landing," Iron Man informed them tensely, "where we may be out of range of the rays."

Halting their downward plunge skillfully, Iron Man brought the ship to a curving touchdown in watery ooze. The rays stabbed a dozen feet above them, but no closer.

"The curvature of the dome itself cuts off any direct-line beam toward its base. And look—a hatch door leading into the dome! It must be for Karzz's own use, to leave the dome in a mobile craft. Therefore it must have automatic open-and-close controls for him to re-enter."

'While talking, Iron Man had been guiding their craft straight toward the door. When within ten feet, some electrosensor trigger was set off and a huge round hatch swung open. Water rushed into an inner chamber, pulling their craft with it. Then the outer hatch silently closed, and the whine of a high-powered pump was heard, emptying the chamber. Finally, an inner hatchway opened into the dome itself and its artificial atmosphere.

“All hands out!” barked Cap. “If Karzz is in a different part of this huge dome, he won’t reach here in time to stop us rushing in. And then, if luck is with us, we can stalk him through the dome. Come on.”

The five Avengers dashed through the inner hatch into the lighted dome, upheld by massive crossbeams that defied the almost unbelievable crushing pressure at seabottom. It was all mind-staggering seventieth-century technology.

After a swift glance around, surveying details, Cap gave instructions. “Catwalks and stairways all seem to lead to a master control chamber at the apex -of the dome, “where Karzz probably is holed. up. We’ll scatter now. Hawkeye, the next catwalk left. Iron Man, the right one. I’ll go up the closest one. As for Goliath and Wasp...”

“No need to tell us,” shrilled a thin voice from the shrinking girl. “As the Ant-Man and Wasp, We’ll be invisible to Karzz, and will be waiting to do our bit when we see the chance.”

Chapter 15

Traps of Death

The amplified voice of Karzz suddenly boomed from the apex.

“Achtung! I constantly underestimate you Avengers. I did not think. you would ever locate my undersea hideout in the first place, nor that if you did find it, you would cleverly invade it through. my own automatic hatchway. So much is to your credit.”

Then his voice changed, ominous with threat.

“But now you will find yourselves facing the five Avenger dooms, picking you off, one by one. Come after me...if you dare.”

“We dare,” was Cap’s answer at the bottom of his catwalk stairway. It was almost a whisper. When he saw that Hawkeye and Iron Man had gained their catwalks, he waved a signal and all three began racing up the winding stairways that hung suspended from the ceiling of the dome.

Iron Man did not dare try jet-flying in the dome with its many crossbeams and guy wires, affording him too little

maneuvering room. He had to climb like the others. Most agile of all, Cap went up the fastest, keeping a wary eye on the globular chamber at the dome's apex. He jerked back with hair-trigger reflexes as a blast-beam knifed down past his ear.

Karzz's aim was handicapped, however, Cap knew. He did not dare aim too close to the stairway itself, or disintegrating metal would bring about collapse. And he could not afford to weaken any part of his bracing system, for the macro-pressured water outside would then crush the dome as flat as a pancake in horrendous seconds.

Karzz would have to try to pick them off with sideswiping shots from strategic angles. Cap took care to keep some portion of the metal catwalk-stairs between himself and the apex chamber.

But why had Karzz been so confident they would meet Avenger dooms?

Booby traps!

As the thought sprang into Cap's mind, he tensed, slowing his upward pace. Now all his senses tautened to keen alertness, as they had so many times in his career in World War II when faced by Nazi booby traps that could only be called fiendish.

The short hairs on the back of Cap's neck bristled in instinctive warning. Something did not look right ahead. What was it? Then he noticed the slightly dull sheen of one step ahead of him, whereas the rest were shiny polished metal. .

Aha! One false step on that false step—Cap could not avoid the play of words in his thoughts—and he'd be a goner in some unknown way. Yet he wanted to set it off and make Karzz think it had worked, thus putting him off guard. .

Cap went back a few steps, then tossed his shield on the bogus step. It exploded with just enough force to kill a man, yet not enough to damage the stairway itself. Cap expertly caught the flying shield, which was unharmed.

At the loud report, Hawkeye and Iron Man glanced that way across the dome through the latticed structure of the triple stairways. Cap made frantic pantomime motions, and they quickly caught on that he was warning them about booby traps.

Iron Man tensed and wondered what lay ahead for him. Karzz would be too clever to repeat the booby traps, knowing that one sprung would tip off the presence of the others. Deciding he needed keener senses than his own human ones, he jabbed studs on his chest-control. From his helmet issued a bat-like radar-beam, sharp and sensitive to anything untoward that might lie ahead.

Then he saw it, through his radar-sensitive eye lenses—a poised mallet fastened to the railing, which could easily brain a man. Yet, by some science legerdemain of the seventieth century, it was invisible to the eye.

Iron Man raised his right gauntlet, and one finger shot forth a shock-beam that touched the fatal step like a man's heavy tread, and the invisible club descended viciously—on empty air. Brushing it aside, Iron Man went on.

Hawkeye, climbing the third stairway, peered ahead warily, looking for the unknown. Nothing seemed amiss.

About to step ahead, a high-pitched voice shrilled. in his ear: "Stop, Hawkeye! That step ahead is triggered with death. Watch . . ."

The Wasp's tiny form flew down to the next step, shooting her sting-beam at full power and jarring the whole step. Instantly, a dozen long recessed needles sprang upward, their points tinted blue with poison. They would have pierced up through Hawkeye's boots into his feet.....

Flitting between the spikes safely, the Wasp then swung up past Hawkeye's face. "See?"

"Thanks, Wasp," Hawkeye managed to say, wiping his brow. He took a deep breath. "You had the privilege of saying my life," he said banteringly, regaining his composure.

"Oh, lucky, lucky me!" buzzed the Wasp, "But I condemned myself to hearing your cornville cracks for weeks and years ahead, unlucky me."

"Why do you. admire my witticisms so much, Wasp? I must say *something* right all the time." Hawkeye grinned, then raced upward again.

Now all three Avengers—Cap, Iron Man and Hawkeye—met at the top landing and converged on Karzz s globular chamber. "Hsst," said Cap, crouching beside the door. "You rush in first, Iron Man, using Your Z-ray to knock out his force-shield. Then Hawkeye's arrows can divert him from using his belt-rays, giving me time to rush in and crack him on the jaw. And it'll only take one punch—my Sunday Special for supersinners."

Cap nodded his head for the signal, then kicked open the door. Iron Man. sprang in. Karzz turned in amazement. "But my booby traps...the signal lights said they went off!"

"So we're ghosts," was Iron Man's answer, and he aimed his Z-ray. The hissing beam sparkled all around Karzz, dissolving his invisible force-field armor. The sparks died. Karzz was now unprotected.

His hand leaped for his belt-studs, which was Hawkeye's cue to let his twanging bow speed an arrow across the room. Its bulbous point burst and sprayed itch-powder, which had been treated chemically to make it a maddening irritant, over Karzz's hands. He fell to scratching them frantically.

Cap was already plunging across the floor, fist cocked eagerly for its chin target. But Karzz, still scratching, leaned his shoulder back and closed a big switch on the wall. A whining drone like the skirl of bagpipes filled the air, and suddenly Cap stopped in mid-stride.

Hawkeye, starting to notch an arrow in alarm, froze with his bow half pulled out. Iron Man, his hand raised to spray out Weapon-rays, stood as if petrified.

"My best booby trap," leered Karzz triumphantly. The itch-powder was now losing its potency, allowing him to point at the projector extending from the wall and radiating the skirling beams. "I know you can hear me, though you are immobilized. This is my time-stopping ray. I am the master of time and all its tricks. Briefly, that ray stops time for any object or person. it strikes. Since time is not ticking by for you, you cannot make your follow-up move of the next second—which never comes."

He waved at a monitor screen that showed the magnified flitting form of the Wasp darting into the doorway, holding Ant-Man's hand, and skirting around the time-ray. Karzz tuned a dial.

"A simple adjustment and the time-ray hits them too."

The two tiny forms froze, hanging in mid-air.

"The Wasp and the Ant-Man caught in the timeless trap," Karzz gloated. "That means Goliath can never appear."

"That's what we wanted you to think," boomed a voice outside. "If you look close, you'll see that the Wasp dragged in some debris that looks vaguely human, while I resumed my giant size out here. And now...."

Goliath's mighty form came crashing through the side wall, out of range of the time-ray. Picking up a huge chunk of cement, Goliath hurled it at the time-ray projector, smashing it to bits.

The frozen figures came alive and continued where they had left off. Cap's driving legs propelled him forward, and his rock-like fist clobbered Karzz on the chin, flinging him limply against the wall. Seeing Cap had things under control, Hawkeye and Iron Man relaxed.

"It looks as if one powerhouse punch by Cap knocked him colder'n a mackerel," crowed Hawkeye—too soon.

For the sagging figure opened its eyes and spoke to them. "You forget my human form is only a disguise for..." His finger jabbed a belt-stud and they watched in revulsion as they saw the transformation that only Iron Man had witnessed before on Mount Everest.

“...for my true alien form.”

The hideous monster with purple-blotched skin, green lips, blue hair, and fiery red eyes stood before them on his hooved feet, looking like a nightmare that had somehow become reality.

“I can stand breathing your poisonous oxygenated air for a few minutes,” the ghastly creature mouthed. “And in this form we have one elusive attribute, that of turning into intangible amorphous material.”

With that, the monster turned milky in color and formed a cloud of smoke that streamed out the door. Goliath futilely tried to seize it, but he grasped nothing -solid.

Running out, they saw the smoke-alien pouring down through the dome without need of steps, thence into the water-hatchway and into its own deep-sea vehicle parked next to that of the Avengers. Evidently changing inside to solid form, and back t-o human-like Karzz, his amplified voice came to them as they all raced down the stairway.

“You have won a minor skirmish,” he snarled, “driving me away from my dome. But you will never. capture me when I vanish somewhere in your vast outside world, lost when I mingle among three billion people.”

The Avengers dashed up just as the inner door closed. On the other side, they knew, the sea hatch was filing with water as the outer hatch -opened to let in the sea. Then Karzz could speed away in his deep-sea boat, with a long head-start -on them before the hatchway could be put through its cycle again.

Panting, Cap called a hurried conference.

“Let’s size up the situation. Even though we didn’t nab Karzz, what advantages did we gain? For one thing, we got control of this undersea hideout of his. Will he have to come back for any reason?”

“I think so,” said Iron Man. “Up in his control room, I noticed another ray device that I think may be his time teleportation machine—his only way of returning to the future. If I’m right, he’ll have to come back for that sooner or later-or die when the world ends.”

“Good!” cried Cap. “Then we’ll leave one guard here. Let’s see...how about Goliath? He’s equal to ten other men.”

“Okay,” agreed the giant man. “Just let that weasel try to sneak back in and get past me.”

“The rest of us back in the deep-sea boat,” waved Cap, as the inner door opened again, drained of Water.

Soon, after going through the egress process, they sped out through the outer hatch.

Iron Man tuned his long-range sonar, reading off measurements from its ping signals. “Just as I thought,” he muttered. “Karzz has a super-speed boat and is already surfacing.”

Cap looked around slowly, haggardly. “That means to find him We’ll have to search the world.”

“Every country?” gasped the Wasp. “Every city, town, and hamlet? Among millions and millions of people?”

“Talk about a needle lost in a haystack,” said Hawkeye bleakly—“this is like trying to find one grain of sand lost on a beach. ‘It’s hopeless.’”

“Not the way we’re going to do it,” spoke up Iron Man. “We’re going to hunt him electronically. I’ll show you what I mean back at headquarters.”

Chapter 16

The Alien Hunt

“Keep turning the dial one notch at a time,” instructed Iron Man.

It was the next day and they were back at headquarters, using equipment that came from one of Anthony Stark’s labs. There were four monitor screens attended by the four Avengers present. The monitors were connected to a huge computer, and also to four radar-dish aerials on the roof that pointed in different directions.

“The basic principle is simple,” explained Iron Man. “The radar dishes are locked onto four synchronous satellites put up by NASA for radio signals to be relayed around the world. What we are relaying around the world is a ‘spy-ray,’ you might call it. It does not interfere with the normal operations of the communications satellites.”

He patted an electronic box that fed signals into the system.

“An invention I borrowed from Tony Stark’s labs which he’s developing for the military. This is a good test. Each person in the World has his own special brain-wave pattern, as distinctively different as his fingerprints are from other people’s prints. Now, Karzz’s alien brain waves, which he can’t disguise, would stand out like the well-known sore thumb from the characteristic patterns of human minds, like these.”

Iron Man held up a chart of various human brain-wave patterns that were in flowing waves, differing minutely in the height of the curves, their closeness together, and the dips or peaks of the full string.

“Alien brain waves will be totally different,” said Iron Man. “I don’t know what they’ll look like, but just watch for any freakishly distorted pattern and we’ll have Karzz nailed down, no matter where he’s hiding. Each of us is attuned to a separate syncom satellite which covers a different broad region of earth. The four of us cover the world with our monitor screens.”

“Every square inch?” asked the Wasp in wonder.

“Every square millimeter,” corrected Iron Man “This spy-ray system could be tuned, if we wished, to finding one blue microbe out of a trillion red ones. Take my word for it that, as you turn the dial, you are scanning a different square mile of earth below the satellites, and every person’s brain wave in that area is registered on your screen. The computer will sort out any number of patterns, even millions at the same time.”

“I don’t understand a word of it,” confessed Hawkeye. “You mean I could tune in my own mind and see a Hawkeye brain pattern?”

“No, you’d just get a blank,” said the Wasp slyly. “He said *brain* pattern.”

“Then take Goliath,” retaliated Hawkeye. “I understand when he grows to giant size, his brain reduces to ant size.”

“Oh, you made me think of Handsome Hank standing guard all. alone at the sea bottom. I miss him so.”

“Hah. That’s like missing the measles---” Hawkeye stopped, seeing that the girl was looking sad. “Sorry, Wasp. Guess I was hitting below the belt.”

“Everybody on the job!” barked Captain America, turning to his own monitor screen.

“It will be a hard job,” warned. Iron Man, “taking your full concentration, hour after hour. If you look away from your screen for a moment, or even blink too much, you might miss Karzz.”

Silence fell as each of them turned his dial and watched the changing patterns of brain waves that sprayed onto the screen constantly. Could they comb the world this Way, picking one alien brain out of three billion people on earth?

Twenty-four hours later, stoically skipping sleep entirely, they were eyesore and numb-nerved.

A radio that Cap tuned in regularly again gave the grim. news.

Key snatches of the newscaster’s words were alarming. “Earth undergoing fantastic change . . . ocean level up five feet . . . Holland dikes threatened...volcanoes erupting in

Philippines, Japan, Australia...violent high-altitude wind forces all jets to fly lower...giant comet plunging toward earth on possible collision course."

"The four earth dooms of Karzz," muttered Iron Man. "Building up to their cataclysmic finale—only three days away now. And we still can't locate Karzz, though we've spy-rayed half the world already."

Five hours later, they had covered nearly the whole world. Iron Man was frowning worriedly. "One hour to go, with only a few small patches of earth left to scan. Is it possible that . . ." His voice trailed away as he worked his monitor dial.

When the hour was up, they all switched off their screens and stared at one another, dumfounded.

Cap finally said it aloud: "Karzz was *nowhere* on earth. Or else he devised some way of hiding and eluding the spy-ray."

"Impossible," said Iron Man. "Impossible, I tell you! Stark's spy-ray works on the telepathic principle, and nothing can stop telepathic waves from coming through."

He spun his dial and his monitor showed a single brain-wave pattern ribboning across the screen. "'There's the brain wave of Goliath, seven and a half miles deep under countless tons of sea water. The deepest mine shaft...the heart of a solid stone mountain...the inside of a nuclear reactor—none of those could prevent Karzz's brain waves from being radiated and picked up by the spy-ray."

"Last night I saw upon the stair," recited the Wasp in a low voice, "a little man who wasn't there; he wasn't there

again today; oh, how I wish he'd go away."

Iron Man winced. "That's about it," he said. "Karzz is somewhere on earth—and yet he isn't. It's incredible, inexplicable, inconceivable."

"Translation-nutty," said Hawkeye. "Too bad, Shell-head, but your electronic gizmo bombed out."

"Don't blame Iron Man," defended Cap. "It Karzz is still on earth, he must have picked out some clever hiding place we never suspected . . . Wherever *that* could be."

Iron Man suddenly jumped up. "Wait...think once. Where is the *one place* on earth we would least expect him to be? The last place We would think of?"

"Huh?" said Hawkeye blankly.

Iron Man turned and ran from the room, banging through door after door in the other section of the building where, as Anthony Stark, he had set up his series of labs and science workshops.

In some of them, his aides were at work. Other labs were dark and temporarily unoccupied. With all his sensors and detectors on, Iron Man paused outside one closed door labeled: ADVANCED RESEARCH LAB. It was used only by Iron Man himself for top-priority science jobs, containing the finest and most prized tools of research.

Iron Man's sensors hemmed faintly, picking up the tell-tale metabolic warmth of a living form beyond the door. The door was locked, but the Golden Avenger rammed through it.

Within, a man with frosty eyes turned from the workbench.

“Karzz!” screeched Iron Man... “You were here all the time, in Avenger headquarters, the one place we didn’t think of!”

“Naturally,” mocked the alien. “It was elementary to outwit you dull-brained earthlings.”

The other Avengers had followed Iron Man, and they stared open-mouthed.

“How do you like that?” groaned Hawkeye. “We look for him all over the earth . . . in places twelve thousand miles away. Yet all the while he was practically sitting in our laps. Well, we’ve got him now.”

“*Au contraire*,” said Karzz coolly. “In the past week, while hiding here, I took the liberty of utilizing the lab’s fine equipment. I constructed two seventieth-century devices. Only the first need concern you now...”

“Grab him, quick,” yelled Iron Man, and all the Avengers rushed forward. “We want him alive.”

But they all seized empty air, as the leering Karzz turned transparent. They could now see the new kind of belt he wore, which glowed with an eerie blue luminescence.

“A fourth-dimensional transporter,” came the fading voice of Karzz. ‘fit allows me to slip through the fourth-dimension and whisk anywhere on earth in the wink of an eye. In a moment, I’ll be back in my undersea. dome . . . without the necessity of going past your Goliath guard at

the sea-hatch door. I'll just go through the walls, by osmosis."

His form faded to nothingness, with a last derisive laugh.

"Goliath," moaned the Wasp. "He'll be in danger, not knowing that Karzz will materialize out of thin air, behind his back..."

Dozing, but ready to awaken at the slightest noise outside the sea-hatch door, Goliath awoke uneasily. He had the feeling that something was wrong...that someone was in the dome with him.

"Impossible," he told himself. "Now don't lose your buttons over the dead silence and loneliness. You've got too many people to disgrace—Henry Pym, Ant-Man, and Goliath—all three of us. Keep hold of your nerves, big boy...."

"*Garçon!*" rang out an insulting voice. "Come up here."

Goliath sat up so violently that he crashed his head against a low crossbeam.

"Karzz!" he gasped dizzily. "His voice came from the apex room!"

Shaking off his dizziness, Goliath raced up the nearest stairway, moving faster than any man one-tenth of his weight could. Bursting into the apex chamber, he faced the grinning alien.

"How did you get in?" roared Goliath, his mind reeling. "I sat before the sea hatch day and night..."

“What good did that do?” cackled Karzz, “when I oozed in through the wall? Now listen to this story of where I was hiding for a week. It’ll kill you.”

It very nearly did. Goliath felt as horribly shocked as the other Avengers had been when they realized how the alien had duped them with such diabolic cunning. But Goliath had noticed no force-field aura around Karzz...and he now strode forward heavily, huge hands -outstretched. “Well! He who laughs last, laughs last, I always say. I’m going to grab you and hold onto you for the next forty-five hours, if I have to, until the others get here . . . Uh?”

Goliath had stopped in mid-stride. Karzz had whipped a headband around his forehead, to which was attached a concave mirror that shone a violet-green glow into Goliath’s eyes. At the same -time, Karzz barked: “Stop, Goliath. You are under my mental control.”

Sweating and straining, Goliath tried to fight the overwhelming hypnotic force that beat at his brain. But then his body relaxed into a slump-shouldered sag, eyes blank, face wooden. Like a zombie, he intoned, “it will be done as you command, master.”

“Good,” Karzz muttered, a murderous look in his eyes. “When the other Avengers arrive, they will find the biggest and strongest Avenger blocking their Way, opposing them, fighting them. What will you do to them, Goliath?”

“I’ll wade into them before they know what is happening,” recited Goliath, following unvoiced telepathic suggestions radiated by Karzz. The giant man’s eyes blazed fiercely. “And then . . . I’ll kill them!”

“That is right, Goliath,” voiced Karzz in sinister glee. “Now we will wait for the *schweinhunde* to enter my trap.”

Chapter 17

Avenger vs Avenger

It was not many hours later, after a rocketplane flight and a deep-sea dive, that the other Avengers approached the sea-hatch door of the dome, wary of blast-rays that did not blaze forth.

"That's funny," said Cap uneasily. "If Karzz is back in control of the dome, having somehow taken Goliath prisoner, why wouldn't he fire his rays at us? He *wants* us to come in. That spells—and smells like—a trap."

"We'll be ready for anything," Iron Man said grimly.

But they were scarcely prepared for the stunning surprise awaiting them ...being confronted by the huge menacing figure of Goliath when they stepped inside the sea hatch into the dome. Behind Goliath stood Karzz.

"*Salaam!* Meet my bodyguard," Karzz; announced gloatingly, "under my electro-hypnotic control...the other device I made in your lab. Go after them, Goliath."

The giant sprang among "them, a human hurricane in action. One mighty blow of his hand flung Hawkeye ten

yards. His other balled fist cracked against Captain America's chin and sent him thudding against the wall. One huge boot swung up and propelled Iron Man away like a football and he tumbled between two crossbeams and wedged fast.

Only the Wasp had escaped the giant's fury, by swiftly shrinking to insect size and buzzing away frantically.

She listened in horror at what came next, while the three male Avengers lay out cold, or too dazed to move.

"Finish them off, Goliath," ordered Karzz. "Pick up that iron club and see that nothing recognizable remains of them. Go...do as I say."

But Goliath was hesitating, a bewildered look on his face, like that of a man coming out of a dream. "But they...my friends," he said brokenly. "Won't...can't harm them."

"Hmm, I see you need another dose of my hypno-ray," snapped Karzz. "Evidently your Avenger minds are so strongly loyal to one another that it takes repeated hypnotic dosages to keep you under control. All right..."

The Wasp helplessly watched Karzz shine his headband device at Goliath, who again subsided into a mindless slave with slack jaws and transfixed stare. In a trance, at Karzz's repeated command, the mighty man picked up a huge spiked iron club that lay ready and strode ponderously toward the nearest limp Avenger.

But the delay, While Goliath was being re-hypnotized, had given the toughest men alive a chance to come to, their senses swimming back. So when Goliath's murderous club

swung down at Captain America, Cap sprang away, gasping in horror at the first sight his eyes had seen after opening.

“Goliath is berserk!” yelled Cap, seeing the other two stirring. “Run for it. Hide in the dome somewhere till we can figure out what to do.”

There was no chance to gain the sea hatch and their deep-sea boat. Their only chance was somehow to survive within the dome itself, stalked by a mad giant. Cap gave Hawkeye a hand and yanked him to his feet, slapping him across the face to wake him up faster. Then the two of them rushed to where Iron Man was wedged, too weak to free himself.

“Jump on my shoulders, Hawkeye,” Cap barked. “Hurry!”

From this vantage, Hawkeye was able to seize one steel leg of Iron Man’s suit and pull him free. Then all three dashed away, just in time, before the lumbering Goliath could get within club range of them.

“This way,” ordered Cap, darting among a group of curved crossbeams, where they all converged. “Plenty of cover for us.”

Following Goliath, Karzz shouted, “You won’t escape this dome alive, *mes amis*. You’re only prolonging the inevitable. Still, maybe it’s better this way. Through Goliath, I’ll have the excitement of stalking and hunting you down, like wild animals, for the kill. Thanks for giving me some fine sport.”

The Wasp shivered at the alien’s fiendishness. But what could she do? Stinging Karzz would do no good, with Goliath on the rampage. As for Goliath . . . she fought against the thought of bringing even the slightest pain to her man.

But then, tears in her eyes, she dive-bombed down and jammed her stinger into his shoulder. Goliath didn't even wince. Again and again she stabbed the behemoth, but there was no reaction.

"I should have known," thought the Wasp, giving up. "He's too big to feel my tiny pricks. It's like trying to sting a dinosaur into submission."

"I saw that on my wrist-monitor, Wasp," warned Karzz. "However, you cannot stop us. After Goliath takes care of the men, I'll send him after you with a fly-swatter."

The Wasp turned pale and darted into a crack, trembling. Would it all end in this tragic way, down in this isolated sea-dome, where no power on earth could save them?

Goliath went charging among the maze of converging crossbeams, but he was handicapped in swinging his club or in leaping, and his agile quarry easily evaded his blows.

"Take a rest, Goliath," -ordered Karzz, hearing the giant wheeze from his exertions. "It is time for re-hypnosis anyway. Come back to me."

This gave the three Avengers a respite. Going into a huddle, they were joined by the Wasp, who settled on Cap's shoulder.

"There's no protective aura around Karzz," stated Iron Man. "We destroyed his force-field belt last time, and he has had no time to make another. Therefore he's depending on Goliath to shield him from us."

“We’d be on more equal footing,” observed Cap, “if we could get that club out of Goliath’s hands. But that would be a miracle.”

“Just what I specialize in,” boasted Hawkeye. “I’ll do it with my little arrows. A gold-plated miracle with a money-back guarantee.”

“Good!” said Cap. “Then each of us will tackle Goliath in turn—iron Man, Hawkeye, and myself, in that order—trying to weaken or defeat him. If all three of us tried at once, we’d get in each other’s Way.”

“Y—you won’t kill him?” begged the Wasp, with a sob in her voice.

Cap shook his head reassuringly. “We’ll only try to knock him out, Wasp. But remember, the fate of earth, and of future worlds, is at stake. If We fail to defeat him alive”—Cap’s face went ‘deadly grim—“then it will have to be the other way.”

The tiny girl on his shoulder Went white with shock. But she made no remonstrance against what plainly had to be. She flew off to find a quiet corner where she could sob, and relieve the pent-up emotion bursting within her.

“It’ll break Wasp’s heart,” murmured Hawkeye, “if we have to use plan two against Goliath. She’s too swell a girl for that to happen....”

He stopped, flushing in embarrassment as the other two stared at him in surprise.

“Look,” he growled, “I don’t mind beating her brains out in repartee. But I steer clear of her heart.”

“Amazing,” said Iron Man to Cap. “That guy is human after all.”

“Hardly the witty cynic he pretends to be,” agreed Cap. Then he went on: “Okay, do your stuff now, Hawkeye,” and gave him a pat on his shoulder.

The archer crouched and crept away warily, peering over a beam through the interstices of a latticework cross support.

Across the huge domed chamber, Karzz was ordering Goliath back into action, striding forward with his huge spiked club. Noiselessly, Hawkeye notched an arrow pulled back the cord, and took aim with his hawk-sharp eye.

Whungggggg.

The arrow struck the club in the middle, and amazingly pierced half its length into the hard steel.

“A tungsten-carbide knife-edge point,” whispered Hawkeye for the benefit of Cap and Iron Man behind him. “Harder than diamond, and with the sharpest edge ever honed. It cuts through steel like a knife through butter. And within its shaft is a proton battery, supplying a burst of current equal to a thousand lightning bolts. Watch.”

Suddenly, a pyrotechnic shower of electrical sparks sprang from the tip of every spike. Goliath jerked and staggered, flinging the club away. It kept sparking. “It’ll keep charged for hours,” said Hawkeye. “Goliath got a jolt that would floor an elephant. However, he’s not an elephant but an Avenger, so he’ll recover.”

Pulling himself together, Goliath strode forward, egged on by Karzz. "So they eliminated your club," Karzz said, "but you. still have two giant clubs left—your mighty hands. Smash the Avengers, Goliath!"

"This is it," breathed Iron Man, dashing out of hiding as the first -one chosen to tackle the man-mountain.

Iron Man's death-rays were out of the question, of course, for this man-to-man struggle. Instead, he jetted off his feet and flew forward. with head down, slamming into Goliath's chest like a human battering ram.

Goliath rocked back on his heels. That was all. Then he straddled his legs, waiting for more. Iron Man rheostated his power-unit to the proper value and then raised his hand to shoot forth blow-beams. They were balls of invisible energy that could be felt quite like a blow from a fist, but with transistorized power behind them like a dozen. Jack Dempsey wallops packed into -one.

Iron Man aimed again and again, raining blows at Goliath's face, chin, shoulders, mid-section, belt level. Goliath's flesh quivered at each spot under the impact, but he was not knocked down, not even brought to one knee. He just withstood the storm passively, patiently.

"Tough?" muttered Iron Man to himself. "That big lug must be made of iron harder than my -suit. Hmm...I'll. try concussion."

He swooped around in the air and aimed a finger-beam downward, whose nuclear packet of ions detonated violently and blew a foot-wide crater in the concrete flooring of the dome, not more than ten feet in front of Goliath.

The concussion blew him off his feet, and he tumbled backward into a crossbeam that bent under his weight. By all odds, the titan should have passed out from the bruising shock. But astounded -Iron Man saw. Goliath clamber to his feet, shake his head, then brandish his fists defiantly with all the massive power he had before.

“Truly, this huge human is superhuman,” said Karzz, himself impressed. Then his voice rang out mockingly, “Come on, you champs. Try to defeat the champ.”

Iron Man closed in desperately, utilizing his boot-jets to hover -on even keel with Goliath and hammer away at him with his steel-gloved hands. But along with each blow went the transistorized power of his atomic batteries, geared into the levered mechanisms of his steel arms.

Goliath slammed back, in turn. Iron Man’s armor, plus his powerful stabilizing gyros, kept him from being hurled back like a rag dummy. But within his suit, he began to feel the thuds of those hammering fists. And with one of Goliath’s fantastic blows, Iron Man heard a cracking sound.

Then a wire snapped and power relays switched over, cutting off Iron Man’s gyro. Goliath’s next blow sent him scudding across the floor like a hockey puck, to end up against a steel post with a loud clang.

As Cap and Hawkeye dashed up and helped him to his feet, Iron Man gasped, “He opened up a crack in my suit. A tiny one, but enough to put my suit partly out of commission. Let’s face it, guys...I’ve been licked.”

“Don’t let it throw you,” said Cap. “Remember, none of us has ever had an all-out fight with Goliath, for keeps. We

just never knew what a human powerhouse he was. Well, your turn, Hawkeye, and don't spare the arrows."

"I've got a million of 'em," boasted Hawkeye, then added wryly, "But only a few will shake up. Goliath...I hope."

Springing out into the open, with a clear shot toward Goliath across the floor, Hawkeye whipped the first arrow from his quiver to his bowstring and let fly, all in a second's blur of motion.

Straight and true sped the arrow, at Goliath's heart.

Watching from her aerial perch, the Wasp's blood froze. Had Hawkeye broken the pledge and shot a kill-arrow at her man?

But the arrow's point opened out to release an instant-inflating bag under rock-hard pressure, and what amounted to a boxer's glove slammed into Goliath's chest. However, the arrow's momentum brought the impact to that of a blow by the world's heavyweight champion plus the kick of a mule and the blow of a sledgehammer.

But it might as well have been delivered against the side of a battleship with twelve-inch armor-plate, for all that Goliath felt of it. He just started. to walk menacingly toward his tormentor.

Faster than the eye could follow, Hawkeye let fly with the stun. arrow, the brass-knuckle arrow, the bone-blow arrow, and a dozen more, all aimed at what might be vulnerable spots on Goliath's body.

"He's about as vulnerable as a brick wall," Hawkeye growled to himself. "But maybe my bolo arrow will make him

flop hard on his head and knock himself out.”

The bolo arrow whistled through the air, its weighted cords swirling and catching Goliath around the ankles. He kept walking as if unaware of any entanglement, and the cords only whipped around and snapped apart like rotten string.

“I see it, but I don’t believe it,” Hawkeye said. with a curse. “That was beryllium steel heavy-gauge wire he waded through. You’d better think of something mighty quick, bowman . . . or. you’ll bow to defeat, man, and that’s no joke.”

Watching, the Wasp tried to choke down unwilling pride that welled up in her. “My Gulliver is putting the other Avengers in the shade. What a man’s man’s man!”

Her face went gaunt. “But we don’t want him to win, because then Karzz wins. Oh, Goliath, don’t fight your best...please... please...”

But Karzz, re-enforcing his hypnotic control with another charge of the mental slave-ray, was exhorting: “Battle your best, Goliath. Fight as you’ve never fought before.”

“I obey, master,” growled the titan, caught in his spell.

Hawkeye had one last arrow to try. Unlike the others, it flew leisurely, as if in slow motion. Then it began curving and looped around Goliath in circles, unreeling something invisible.

“The plasma chain has to Work,” prayed the archer. “It’s a form of energized plasma particles that link up into a chain more rigid than a steel chain, or the heaviest rope.

The arrow tightens this plasma-rope around the victim's chest like a superbearhug. With his breath knocked out, Goliath ought to say uncle."

Goliath stopped short, obviously feeling the invisible rope winding around his chest and tightening like a python's coils. He began wheezing and fighting for air. But then, he started expanding his chest, throwing every muscle into the effort until his face turned red.

There was the faintest snapping sound and then his lungs gulped in fresh air.

"Now I believe in miracles," groaned Hawkeye. "He broke a plasma-chain tough enough to haul in a whale with a rod and reel. That guy isn't human."

In one bravely mad last try at victory, Hawkeye ran close to the towering man, firing stun arrows, hoping the added force at close range would win out. Goliath shrugged them off with little grunts, then seized Hawkeye by the arm and flung him through the air like some debris that had 'gotten in his way.

"He went up so high he'll be killed by the drop," gloated Karzz.

Wasp put horrified hands in front of her tiny face. *Oh, no...no!* she thought...that big lovable tease...every bone in his body will break.

But a breezy voice sang from the air. "Don't count me out, anybody . . . not with my hook-rope arrow."

In mid-air, twisting agilely, Hawkeye Was pulling his bow and shooting an arrow upward. From its tubular shaft

unwound a thin cord with a hook at the upper end, which neatly caught in a beam higher up. With the other end anchored to his belt, Hawkeye's downward plunge was halted by the tautening rope, With enough stretchiness to cushion the jerk and avoid snapping.

Swinging down like a jungleman on his vine, Hawkeye landed neatly in a beam higher up. With the other end anchored to his belt, Hawkeye's downward plunge was halted by the tautening rope, With enough stretchiness to cushion the jerk and avoid snapping.

“Did you quiverers,” chided Hawkeye, “think I had reached the end of my quiver?” But his blithe tone ended and became terse dismay. “Two down, one to go . . .against Goliath, the human bulldozer.”

Chapter 18

Destiny's Decision

Cap was already loosening the straps of his shield. Darting out into the open, he swung his whole body into a throw. The spinning steel implement sailed toward Goliath edge foremost, cutting through the air.

"It would slice even Goliath in half if that edge ever hit him," thought Cap. "But I put 'English' in my throw and now it'll turn...."

Obediently, the shield turned part-way broadside and arched upward, clanging against Goliath's temple with the force of a falling meteorite. Then the ricocheting shield spun in a tight hairpin curve and circled back into Cap's hands. It had taken him untold hours of practice to throw it that way, like a boomerang.

Back in the old war days, the star-spangled champion had often laid low three or four Nazis at a clip with his skipping shield, or had smashed down thick oak doors, and even hammered machine guns into broken junk.

Cap knew his eyes were lying. Goliath should be sprawled flat on the floor from the power-packed blow of the

shield. it must be a delusion that he was seeing Goliath still standing there, -only reeling a little and regaining his balance while rubbing his head a bit. But Cap knew it was no delusion when the massive man came charging toward him like a flesh-and-blood juggernaut.

Cap slung his shield again, hoping repeated blows might at last do the knockout job. But Goliath was cannily watching and swiftly ducked. When the boomeranging shield returned and Cap swung it again. at the giant's middle, Goliath turned and took the blow on his broad back where it could do little harm. And that also made the shield drop there, out of reach of its owner.

Tensing up every muscle in his body, Cap went into his famed crouch and then drove forward, his legs churning like steam pistons. The sheer tremendous force of his body plunge had often bowled over a dozen Nazis in. the old days. And one time, in an exhibition football game for charity, Cap had carried the ball through eleven tacklers—the whole opposing team—for a touchdown.

Not once, but four times. And when they tried to score, the opposing ball-runners had been stopped time and again by what they had sworn, in a punch-drunk state,

was a solid stone wall that had suddenly blocked their way. The wall always had strange colors—red, white, and blue.

But Cap was driving himself faster than ever in his life before—either life, in the past or present. He got up to better-than-Olympic speed and slammed his lowered head squarely in Goliath's middle.

Goliath grunted and sat down. Bouncing back, Cap also sat on the floor, head whirling. That was all he had done, pushed Goliath over with his bulldozing plunge. But he was

otherwise unhurt and was about to clamber back on his feet.

Cap quickly leaped up, his fists within reach of the sitting Goliath's face before he could rise. Unmatched shoulder muscles and the world's best biceps went into every punch that Cap pounded into Goliath's face with the rapidity of a machine gun, hoping to knock him out by sheer brain-bruising slugging.

Suddenly, the roof fell in on Cap. That was what it seemed like when a giant weapon—five huge knuckles—exploded against his chin.

Cap's arching body flew backward and landed in a heap against a steel post. Then his shield came sailing, propelled by Goliath. Cap ducked and it struck the post, cracking it in half, but with the weight of the dome above exerting pressure and keeping the broken ends pressed together.

Cap limped back to Hawkeye and Iron Man. All three looked at each other with lips set into grim lines.

The Wasp came flying down, eyes haunted with horror. She knew what they had to do next.

"This is it," Cap said flatly. "All three of us this time—to the death."

"Please," moaned the Wasp. "Isn't there some other way? Must Goliath...die?"

Cap turned hollow eyes on her. "It's either him, and Karzz...or all the people on earth...three billion souls." His voice went gentle. "Sorry, kid. Don't watch. Fly up in the rafters and wait till it's all over."

As the insect-girl flirted away, a tiny tear dropped on Cap's hand. He looked at it for a long, silent moment. Then he drew himself up, giving the command that only he could give, and for which he alone was responsible.

"This time, men, it's kill—or be killed. Let's get to it."

Stepping out into the open, Cap poised his shield for a deadly throw at Goliath's throat. Hawkeye's drawn bow was ready to speed a fatal arrow at the giant's heart. Iron Man raised both his hands to spew forth killer-rays.

And now they noticed that Goliath held a weapon too, something that looked like a blunderbuss with a flaring barrel.

"I signaled the future," called out Karzz, "for them to send the death-beam gun, which Goliath Will use to mow you down. Prepare for death, Avengers!"

Fate seemed to hold its breath.

But the Wasp was challenging destiny. The tiny winged girl darted down toward Karzz at high speed. Checking constantly in his wrist-monitor, Karzz saw the Wasp coming straight toward his face, snapping on her sting-ray.

"Fool, girl," he cried, "are you trying to blind me?"

He flung a hand up before his eyes protectively. But arriving at bullet speed, the Wasp used her jabbing sting-beam to slice through the headband that held the hypnotic mirror. It clattered to the floor.

The noise seemed to snap Goliath out -of a trance. He looked at the weapon in his hands, bewildered.

“Goliath!” screamed the tiny creature buzzing around his head. “Don’t obey Karzz any more. Those three men advancing are your friends. You. are free of Karzz's evil control. Throw the weapon away . . . throw it away!”

Goliath hesitated, his half-hypnotized mind still unable to think straight. With a curse, Karzz snatched up his hypnotic device and fumblingly tried to aim it at Goliath.

The three advancing Avengers had stopped and they withheld their death blows.

“Goliath!” screeched the Wasp again, desperately. “You are an Avenger!”

“Yes,” roared Goliath suddenly, twisting the weapon in his hands into a tangled Wreck. Then he turned balefully toward Karzz, who was just shining the violet-green light in his eyes.

A huge hand swept across the alien’s face, knocking him a dozen feet away. “Now I know who I am, and what you are,” bellowed Goliath.

“Thank heaven!” sobbed the Wasp, flitting over him. Then she flew over to where Karzz lay groaning. “Ever hear of this expression—*cherchez la femme?*” ‘

“*Viva la femme*, I say,” boomed Goliath to the other three. “We’re back together, Avengers.”

“Right, High Pockets,” said Hawkeye, getting there first. “Shake.”

A moment later, Hawkeye sagged at the knees as a huge paw grasped his. "Me and my big ideas," Hawkeye groaned. "Let go, Goliath, before you crush my superb arrow-shooting hand."

"But what's this all about?" asked Goliath, puzzled. "The last I remember I was charging Karzz up in his room and he was shining some kind of light in my eyes."

Cap rapidly filled him in.

Goliath's face turned pale halfway through the account, at the tragedy that had nearly wrecked their group. Then, in black fury, he strode to Karzz and picked him up by the collar, dangling him off the floor.

"You murderous little pipsqueak!" roared Goliath.

"Now you're in my power and I'm going to . . ."

Karzz shrieked in terror at what he saw in Goliath's eyes...

"But Iron Man called out, "Stop, Goliath. We need Karzz alive. He was the one who launched the four earth dooms..."

The Avengers looked at one another, the joy at reunion wiped out by this stark realization. .

" . . . and he's going to save the earth now," finished Iron Man.

They all stared...

"You've flipped, Rust Pot," said Hawkeye. "He started four destructive processes that even he couldn't stop now."

“He can halt them very simply,” returned Iron Man. “Remember Karzz is the master of time. He used time-teleportation to travel into the past. He used the time-stopping ray to ‘freeze’ us once. And...”

Iron Man paused and faced the alien. “Karzz, can you turn time backward for earth...back. to the day before your four dooms began?”

“Yes,” nodded Karzz. “And I’ll. do it if you promise my life is safe afterward.”

“Agreed,” came from Cap immediately. There simply was no other choice, with the fate of a whole world at stake.

“Time,” announced Karzz, “Will. now be reversed for earth.”

They were in Anthony Stark’s laboratories the next day. Iron Man and Karzz had Worked through the night, putting together a vast machine according to the alien’s blueprints. They were ready now to use it. Karzz pushed the master button. No sound came from the machine, no sign of anything happening. But on the wall, the hands of the clock. began spinning backward.

“Down in Antarctica,” said Iron Man, “the heat device has gone dead and ocean waters will recede until the ice cap grows back to its original state. In the South Pacific, all eruptions are ceasing and the molten magma is flowing back down as the crust heals itself of cracks caused by the Vulcan Machine.”

He pointed upward.

“Above earth, the superwind is dying down as the Storm Satellite vanishes, whisking back to the future where it came from. And the giant comet, drawn by ultramagnetic attraction, is now being driven back into outer space by antimagnetic forces.”

He shrugged. “Don’t ask me to explain it in any logical way. All I can promise you, from Karzz’s formulas and chrono-equations, is that in some weird way that twentieth-century science cannot yet understand, time is turning backward and healing earth of its mortal wounds.” The proof came via radio as a puzzled and joyful announcer said, “Amazingly, the four menacing phenomena that seemed to be building up to the end of the world have subsided . . . nobody knows why.”

“Except us,” murmured Iron Man.

“I have carried out my end of the bargain,” said Karzz stepping toward the door. “In turn, my life is spared....”

Iron Man blocked his way. “Agreed, chum. But you’re not going anywhere—except back to the seventieth century.”

“Nein! ... non! ... nyet!” babbled Karzz frantically, his face reflecting stark terror. “Back there I was a defeated conqueror, hated and despised. An exile, a condemned man. They will hunt me down ruthlessly and execute me. . . .”

“That’s their business,” said Iron Man shortly, Whipping the cover off a new apparatus. “I brought along your time-teleportation device from the seadome. I’m setting the dials for the future, and now...”

Karzz was still screaming in protest as a purling ray bathed him, fading him out of the twentieth century and whisking him. to the seventieth.

“The worst punishment he could have,” said Iron Man, “was to be sent back to the defeat, disgrace, and death he tried to escape from. Karzz the Conqueror won’t have a second chance to try to conquer time and change history.”

“Oh, well, another job done,” drawled Hawkeye, patting back a false yawn. “I’m glad I saved the world...with the help of you other Avengers, of course.”

“Knowing how modest you are,” said the Wasp, “I won’t tell the public you did it practically single-handedly, or you’d be mobbed.”

Captain America smiled. All was back to normal.

“Avengers, assemble!” he barked, and added, “For a celebration.”

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